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by Ralph
McInerney

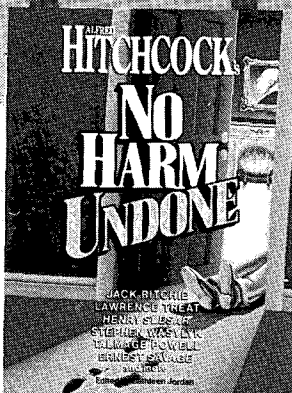
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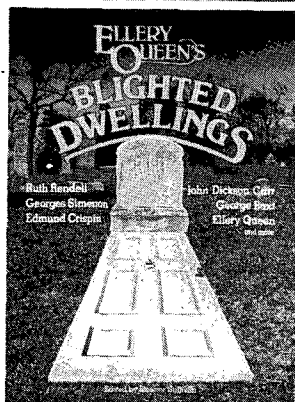
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Coming up soon . . . something special. This spring brings not only the regular annual Edgar Awards banquet but, in the same week, the Fourth International Crime Writers Congress.

The first three Congresses were held in 1975 in London, in 1978 in New York, and in 1981 in Stockholm. This one returns to New York, and much is being planned for it. The events will cover five days, from Monday, May 9, through Friday, May 13, and will include the Edgar dinner on Thursday. So far in the works as well: an opening reception at the New York Public Library; a gala farewell reception and a celebrity auction; entertainment by the cast of the Broadway show, *The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940*; an evening Mystery

Cruise (for an optional extra fee); addresses by author Robert B. Parker, by U. S. Attorney Rudolph Guiliani, and others; and lots more.

The cost of participating in the Congress is \$250 (\$200 if you don't attend the Edgar banquet), and hotel rooms at a reduced rate (\$312.50 per person for double occupancy for four nights, \$553 per person for single occupancy) can be obtained at the Sheraton Centre Hotel by sending a \$100 deposit to the Westwood Travel Agency, 79 Westwood Avenue, Westwood, New Jersey 07675, Attn: Mystery Writers of America. To make advance reservations for the Congress, send a \$50 deposit to Mystery Writers of America, 236 West 27th Street, Room 600, N.Y., N.Y. 10001, Attn: Congress. The balance of *(continued on page 34)*

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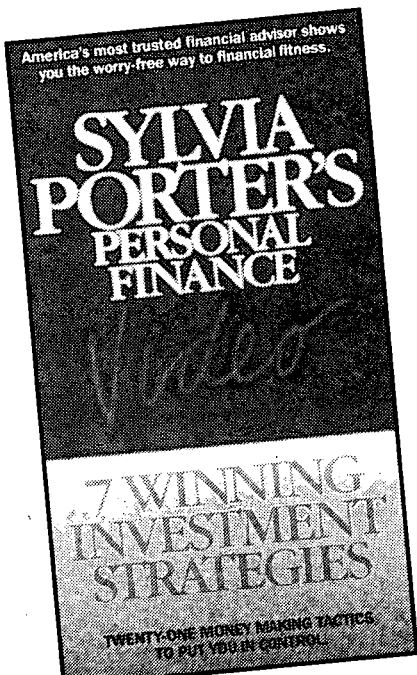
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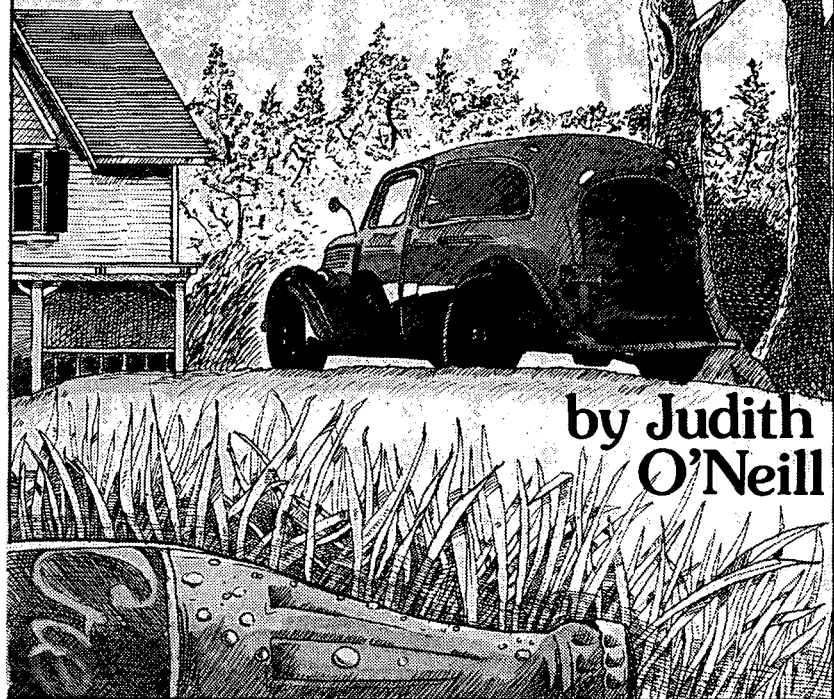
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FICTION

Bridey's Caller



by Judith
O'Neill

When the mail came this morning, I walked out to get it. The letter from my cousin Nellie was full of chatty family news about her children and grandchildren and questions about mine. I smiled as I strolled back up to the house, reading. And then she casually mentioned in current town happenings that "old Bridey" had died. I had to sit down suddenly on the steps.

When I was very young, almost forty years ago now, I used to

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go and stay with my grandparents in Helenwood, Kansas, for long weeks in the summer. I loved it there. I was the oldest by four years of all my cousins who lived in or around Helenwood. So, during the time I was there, I was Miss Queen Bee. My cousin Nellie and I were especially close. She lived on a farm just outside the tiny town, and during my stays she would be brought in to keep me company. She was an adoring little girl with dark curly hair and big brown eyes. And because she was so very gifted at worshipping, she was for years by far my favorite cousin.

My grandparents did not live on a farm, but coming as I did from the "big" city of St. Joseph just across the river, it seemed very rural to me. These were my mother's parents—the sober, honest, almost severe side of the family—as opposed to my father's side, which is another story altogether.

The very order of everything in my grandparents' Helenwood home appealed to me. All my remembering years I had been a part of that old white house set back from the dusty street. Helenwood had only one paved street. Actually it was the highway that ran through town, but it was referred to as "Main Street" and had the post office, a grocery store, and farther along, the red brick school—kindergarten through twelfth grade. My grandparents' home was three blocks away from the highway, back where the houses were separated by huge tree-shaded flat lawns. There were no sidewalks anywhere in town. In winter when the snow melted or spring when the rains came and the river rose, you stayed indoors as much as you could.

Summers were dry and hot and my mother would drive me over the arched, narrow bridge from St. Joe and deliver me to my grandparents. Nellie would already be there and we would set about exploring. We did a lot of "exploring" because there wasn't much else to do. We walked everywhere, from the creek to the Missouri River, up to the highway and the post office, talking, talking.

But our favorite place, only four houses up the street from my grandparents' house, was Bridey's. Bridget was her name, and I'm not sure we ever knew her last name; everyone referred to her as Bridey and so did we. She was a tall, thin woman with gray hair pulled back in a bun and gray eyes. I remember they were gray because she was one of the few people I ever knew whose eyes were exactly the same color as her hair. She had a small three room house, and the front room she had set up as a country store. Straight back from that was her bedroom and then the kitchen at the back.

The "bathroom" was out the back path, surrounded by vines and trees. It was all very neat and clean. She had a door shutting off her bedroom/sitting room, but in the summer all the doors stood open to let a breeze through, so when you walked into her store, you could look right back through the bedroom and kitchen to the back porch.

But Nellie and I were not very interested in what Bridey had in the back rooms. What she had in the front room was what we went for—that long, oval, zinc washtub set up on short sawhorses and filled with huge chunks of ice and floating bottles of soda pop. Leaning against that icy tub, fishing around for your favorite soda, was the coldest you could get in Helenwood in the summer. It is hard for people now to understand the effort and energy we had to put into keeping cool in those days. Nowadays it is just as hot in Kansas, but you can escape into air conditioning. Then you couldn't escape it. Even at night, when breezes turn cool in other places, in Kansas a hot wind blows up across Texas and Oklahoma and fries you. It is a sweet-smelling wind, and if it doesn't blow you can poach in your own sweat, but it doesn't really cool you. No, in those days there was no way to escape it except to jump in the creek or the river, but there was always my grandmother's fear of polio. So mostly we just tried to find ways to bear it and that led us to spending a lot of time in Bridey's, leaning against the soda tub. She was never short or impatient with us, she let us lean and play in the water. She didn't pay special attention to us and we in our turn were polite, not making a mess or noise. As "Emmitt and Louise's grandchildren" we were conscious of a certain amount of responsibility. We behaved ourselves so as not to reflect badly on our elders. I'm not sure how they managed that bit of psychological control, I don't think they ever *told* us that, it was something we just knew. Nellie loved grape soda above all else and I was overly fond of cream. Even then I appreciated that Bridey kept the tub well stocked. When my whole arm finally became numb I would fish one out and pop it open with the opener tied with a string onto the tub handle. Then I would lean my bare back against the tub and slug that first icy gulp down my hot, dry throat.

I always thought it was an oversized zinc washtub, but it was very long for that and when I thought about it later, and believe me I did think *a lot* about it later, I thought maybe it had been a trough for horses to drink out of at one time. I have seen them from time to time in antique shops since then, and they always make me a little sick at my stomach.

Bridey lived alone, and while there were all kinds of Sunday laws in Kansas in those days, she would open her door about ten in the morning on Sunday and if you went by, she would sell you what you wanted. But in our eyes Bridey had a fault. This was her Sunday caller. Every Sunday, about two P.M., Bridey's caller would come. He drove across the bridge from St. Joe and down onto the shaded streets of Helenwood and around to the back of Bridey's. He never parked in front, always in the back under the trees there. Why, I can't imagine, as everyone in town could see his car in back as well as if he had parked it in front. He would then get out of his car—a short, energetic, goodlooking man in a dark suit and hat, and walk to the back door and go in. Shortly thereafter Bridey would close her front door and her back door and no longer be available for business. Somewhere about five P.M. her caller would depart the way he had come, out the back, into his car, down the streets, and out of Helenwood to the bridge, not to be seen again until the next Sunday. I had broodingly watched this coming and going from my grandfather's grape arbor countless Sundays.

Of course Nellie and I were affronted by this because Bridey's was *never* closed. If she was there, day or night, she was open and there was easy access to the soda tub. And it seemed the hottest and thirstiest we ever got was between two and five on Sunday afternoons. I was vaguely aware that my grandmother was affronted by this, too, but I could not fathom her giving a whit about the soda tub and she rarely ran out of things just as she needed them, so I couldn't put my finger on the cause of her displeasure. She liked Bridey, I knew; Grandma had known her all of her life. She would sometimes go and sit on Bridey's porch when she was passing on her way to or from the post office and they would talk. But when the Sunday closings came up she would frown and get testy. My grandfather got a big kick out of it. Once, as we sat at Sunday dinner, Nellie and I were again complaining, of course, and Nellie, being as blunt and repetitive as any six-year-old, asked for about the five hundredth time that summer, "Why does she close every Sunday like this?" and my grandmother snapped, "Because she has a caller, you know that, now eat those mashed potatoes."

I was a little perplexed by this behavior myself. We didn't go around closing all our doors and keeping people out when we had company. "But why does she close the doors?" I asked, musing. "It must be hot in there."

My grandfather laughed. "I bet," he said.

"Emmitt, Emmitt!" my grandmother warned sharply.

But my grandfather was enjoying himself now and teasing my red-faced grandmother. It was seldom I had seen her blush. "I think," he said, laughing at her, "that Bridey takes a little after-dinner nap."

My grandmother threw her fork down on the table and glared at him. "Emmitt, that's just about enough!"

He was laughing so hard now he had to take his glasses off and wipe his eyes with his napkin. And while he was doing this Nellie said in her self-righteous little way, "But isn't it rude of Bridey to take a nap while her caller is there?"

My grandfather started choking and had to leave the table and my grandmother turned on Nellie and me and told us in no uncertain terms that other people's manners were not our business and we had plenty to do to mind our *own* manners and it was *very* bad manners to be so nosy about other people's lives and how they conducted them.

That was my tenth summer. It stands out clearly in my mind for many reasons. For one, it was the most incredibly hot summer I have ever lived through, everyone talked about nothing but the weather and the crops and the lack of rain and Nellie and I consumed a prodigious amount of soda. Secondly, I was at my grandparents' all summer for the first time ever and the reason for that is the third but by far most important reason I remember that summer. At the very beginning of it, just after school was out, my mother had a nervous breakdown. Up until the previous Christmas I had never suspected she had a nerve in her body. She was always a happy, fun person with laughing eyes. To this day, when I think of her, I remember those laughing brown eyes. Well, they weren't laughing that year. My father had fallen in love with someone else, she had told me just before Christmas. Just like that, my happy-go-lucky, handsome, generous father was gone. Gone with someone else. There's a lot about that Christmas I don't remember. I remember my mother sitting very still at the dining room table in our house in St. Joe, with the snow falling outside the window behind her, and telling me he had gone. I had never even heard them argue. We would get used to it, my mother said bleakly, we would go on with our lives and they would be different, but we would get used to it. Somewhere in that body I knew my mother must still reside, but I couldn't see her at all in the dead brown eyes and the bleached white face.

I went to my grandparents' the day school was out, and my mother went to the hospital.

My grandparents were sick with worry. They didn't talk about it to me much, but they talked to me a lot more. They seemed to go out of their way, both of them, to explain the whys of things and the idiosyncracies of the people in town. "Look at poor Cynthia Jenkins," my grandmother would say, "she lost both her parents in a flood when she was very young and she's turned out all right." That sort of thing. I learned a lot about people in Helenwood I hadn't previously known as my grandparents gently pointed out one survivor after another. And somewhere in that summer I learned that Bridget was one of these—her father dead when she was less than three years old. Her mother had married a man with four children, and it came out (from my grandfather, I'm sure) that the Sunday caller was one of these stepbrothers, a *married* stepbrother, my grandmother snorted.

We all suffered into August, one brilliant blazing day after another. We woke up drenched, unable to cheat nature out of even a few minutes' early morning coolness, moved sluggishly through the day, and sank exhausted into the already heated sheets at dusk. It was that kind of a day the Sunday I was hanging around the grape arbor waiting for Bridey to open up. It was about time for her caller to leave, so I strolled up through the three back yards separating ours from hers. Yes, the car was still there under the trees at the back of her yard. The back door was still shut. Standing well away from the trunk of the tree to catch even the hot wind and feeling it dry the perspiration on my face and bare arms and scorch my eyes, I waited impatiently for Bridey's caller to leave. And, waiting, I went to sit in the thick, green grass along the stone foundation of her little house where the breeze always seemed cooler.

And I heard Bridey crying. I don't think I purposely sat right under her bedroom window. I was just searching for the coolest spot around and that looked like it, on the shady side of the house, the grass deep and green and bending in the wind. But there I was, right under her open bedroom window. I should have crawled away, but the sobbing was so close I was afraid she would see me. She cried out in a low strangled voice, "Don't, please don't, Ray, don't say you're going for good." She was crying so frantic and wild that I was mesmerized there, scrunched up against the rough stone of the foundation. I could hear his voice as he answered her, but not

his words. She began to beg. I cannot, writing here, relay to you the utter desperation and grief in those low pleas, nor their effect on me. It was Bridey's voice, strangled and harsh in terror and hurt and desolation, begging, begging. It was my voice, and my mother's voice. And I, who had taken the news of my own father's departure stoically, and my mother's breakdown grimly but dry-eyed, rose from the grass sightlessly and ran along the side of the house and back into the trees and down into my grandfather's grape arbor.

I threw myself on the ground under the heavy green leaves and clutched the grass there in my hands and wrenched and tore it out of the ground and beat the earth with my fists. But none of it helped and just like an earthen dam gives way, so did I. I shut my eyes as tight as I could, but I could feel the flood coming, the terrible bitter tears of irreplaceable loss ripping out my heart, and then the dam gave way.

When the weeping was all over and I had rolled onto my back to stare up through the grape leaves at the bright sky, I marveled that there could have been that much water in me. And then I thought about Bridey. Now I know that he must have been everything to her. For twenty years, she must have lived for those short Sunday afternoons. Three precious hours of his time a week.

My grandfather was asleep on the recliner on the front porch, his iced tea sitting on the porch floor, all its ice long melted. My grandmother and Nellie were napping, too, when I went into the house. Nellie in her white, little girl cotton slip on the big bed we shared, her dark curls stuck wetly to her forehead. I went into the bathroom and washed my face and combed my hair and wandered down to join my grandfather on the porch.

And then the young people from the Baptist church came swinging down the street, led by the new minister. They had been calling on the sick and widowed and just plain backslidden. Dressed in their Sunday best they looked hot and bedraggled and sweaty. The girls' hair was all wet and hanging down their faces. They frowned against the sun. The boys had on their suit coats and looked like to die.

"We'll stop for a cool drink at Bridey's," the new minister said. "We'll try to get her to open a little early."

So of course I tagged along. The minister, being new, had obviously not caught on to the significance of the car's being there yet, but everyone else in the group had, because they craned their

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necks to glance toward the back. It was still there, but the young people, looking uncomfortable as the new minister walked up onto the porch and banged on the door, weren't about to tell him. I didn't have the words to tell him with. I stood in the shade with the others while he knocked and called. He came back shaking his head. "Guess she's not going to open," he smiled apologetically. "Let's go back to the parsonage for iced tea." And they went off.

I stood there, loath to put forth the effort to get myself back to my grandparents' house, loath to put forth any effort at all, and saw Sheriff Mills come out of his house three houses farther down the road and start toward me. Sheriff Mills had company every Sunday. Mrs. Mills had brothers all over the place and they all gathered with wives and families every week. I knew them, but they didn't have kids my age.

"Afternoon, missy," he said. He was a big, broad, older man and he called all women under twenty "missy." "Miss Bridey not open yet?" he asked, surprised, consulting his watch.

I shook my head. He glanced around at the back. "Hmm . . ." he said. Sheriff Mills was not new in town. He turned back to look down the street toward his house. "Well," he said, "it's getting on toward six and Mother needs milk to get supper on." He glanced behind the house again, hesitated, and mounted the steps.

I guess she had to open when she saw who it was. She didn't look all that different from the way she had earlier that day. Maybe her eyes were a little puffy, but that was all. Her hair was in the bun, not a wisp escaping, her plain face pale but calm.

"I'm real sorry about this, Bridey," the sheriff said, stepping into the store and explaining his quandary. We both of us refrained from glancing into the back room. As Bridey was getting the milk from the big white icebox I scooted past the sheriff and went to the soda tub. I was fishing around for a cream soda and I could hear her and Sheriff Mills talking, but I wasn't paying any attention really.

The water felt so good. I was barefooted and I remember there was a lot of cold water on the dark wood floor. I found my cream soda and clasped it as it bobbed among the huge chunks of ice and the other bottles and then the ice and the bottles floated apart and I looked down into the face of Bridey's caller. He had blue eyes, I remember, very blue. He seemed to be gazing up past me to the ceiling. Then the ice and the bottles floated together again and covered his face.

I thought for a second that I was having heat stroke. My grandmother had talked about it endlessly and warned us time and again to stay out of the sun. She had had it once, when she was young, and when we asked her what it was like, she said you get sick at your stomach and dizzy and disoriented. I thought disoriented must mean seeing things.

I clutched my cream soda and moved it slowly back and forth in the water to clear some space. The ice and the bottles slid apart again and there he was. He seemed to be lying on the bottom of the long tub staring up through the water, his curly hair gently waving over his forehead.

I took out my soda and let the chunks of ice float back together and I turned to look at Bridey. She was staring over the sheriff's shoulder as he dug in his pockets and rattled on. We looked at each other. Sheriff Mills turned and saw me and said, "I see you got your soda, missy," or something inane like that and went right on talking to Bridey. Bridey just stared at me. I think now of all the things I could have done. She must have been waiting for me to scream or faint or just say, "Look here, Sheriff Mills, at Bridey's caller in the soda tub."

I didn't do any of those things. I just walked across the small room, laid my dime on the linoleum-topped counter, and walked out. I remember the tough burnt grass on my bare feet as I crossed the yards. I remember my grandpa still asleep on the porch when I came up onto it. I remember going in and sitting on a chair at the kitchen table and drinking my cream soda while my grandmother moved slowly around in the heat, starting to lay out things for a cold dinner. I don't remember at all just when I started to breathe again.

I don't know what she finally did with him. I don't know how she killed him or got him in the tub. Now that I'm older and have thought of the details of it, one crazy question that keeps popping into my mind is, how did she keep him on the bottom of the tub? Bodies float, don't they?

I don't know how she got rid of the car or how she explained it all. They found the car way out by Krug Park in St. Joe across the river, my grandmother told me. It was a big scandal in Helenwood—how Bridey's caller had disappeared. And Bridey went right on living there, running her little store. I can't say that she was especially nice to me after that. She had never been not nice to me.

We were just more aware of each other. She had to know that I knew. I wasn't four or five. I was ten. She had seen me see him.

I wonder now at how she must have waited. Maybe she thought I would tell my grandparents or my mother when she finally got well or a school friend when school started. It's strange that it never crossed my mind to fear her. I could have easily disappeared down a well or in the river.

I didn't see a great deal of her after that summer. My mother took me back home in time to start sixth grade in September. My father moved up to Mound City and I began to spend summers with him and his new family. Two years later we moved to St. Louis and my mother remarried. So when I was in Helenwood, it was usually en route to my father's or just coming back from his place, so I was there for only a few days at a time. And then, of course, I grew up and had my own life.

Bridey lived there all the rest of her life in that little three room house. She never had another caller. She would sit out on her porch in the evenings, and she didn't close any more on Sunday afternoons. Sometimes when Nellie and I were teenagers, before I could drive grandpa's car over to St. Joe, we would stroll down to Bridey's.

Nellie would still get her grape pop, but I never drank another bottle of cream soda. I had switched to ice cream bars, and if anyone noticed, they thought it was more nutritional anyway.

Bridey would take our money and exchange pleasantries, asking me about St. Louis, how I liked school there, and how my mother was getting on. I answered politely. We kept our eyes neutral. I never saw anything in hers aside from the polite curiosity she had always had and I kept mine bright and warm and empty.

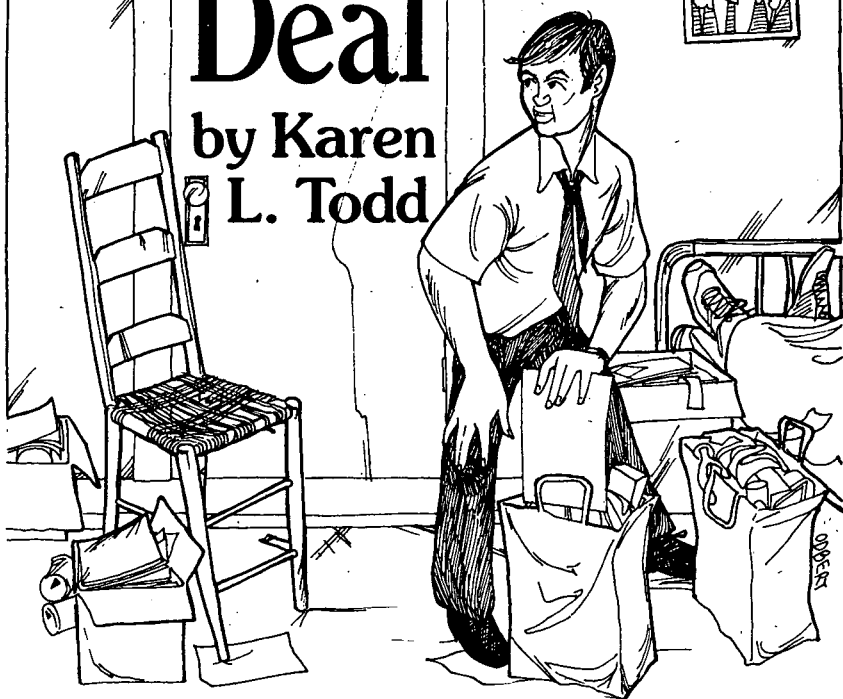
Of all the questions I have pondered there is one I never had to ask myself. Why didn't I tell? Why didn't I run screaming out of the store to my grandmother and fall fainting against her, babbling and hysterical? You must know the answer to that one.

Any other summer maybe I would have. But that summer, after all, I knew all about men leaving you.

FICTION

Bum Deal

by Karen
L. Todd



Even from the third pew back, Uncle Elmo didn't look natural. Not with his hair parted and slicked down. And if he'd worn rosy makeup while he was alive, he'd kept it hidden under gray stubble and a couple of pounds of grime. Looked like the Foley Bros. had wheeled him down to

the car wash and run him through the steam cleaner.

Uncle Elmo's reputation had been sanitized, too. Last week he was a bum. But after the cops found the two hundred nine thousand nine hundred forty-five dollars in his mangy room, he'd been upgraded to a lovable old eccentric.

To hear Cousins Francine and Jolene talk, they'd spent the last nineteen years hunting high and low for Uncle Elmo so they could invite him for dinner and a nice visit. All they had to do was ask me where he was. But I couldn't recall that they'd ever done that. And when I'd bring his name up in conversation, they'd act like I'd mooned the preacher's wife.

Now they occupied the first two pews with their squirmy, starched kids, dabbing tissues at invisible tears. Their husbands, George and Ted, were talking about last night's bowling scores.

Fingers of pain worked their way up my back, a reminder that, at thirty-six, I'd already spent too many years on the end of a pick and shovel. I call myself a landscaper, but I'm just a common laborer with a green thumb. And, until recently, I'd dabbled in marijuana cultivation.

Nothing big, just enough to keep my landlord and the bank happy during the winter months when business was slow. A couple of plants among Mrs. Ormsby's Japanese maples, one in the Brinkermans' side yard, between the pyracanthas

The organ music was beginning to give me the creeps, and I gave a little start when I felt the hand on my shoulder. I looked up as old Tessie Carter

shuffled by. I didn't know whether she'd touched me out of sympathy or because she needed a temporary hand hold, but she made it all the way to the coffin without faltering.

She stared at Uncle Elmo for a minute, then stooped over spraddle-legged and set something on the floor. When she was bent over, I could see four or five saggy hems peeking out from under her motheaten brown coat. I wondered what she'd done with her shopping bags.

Francine turned around and whispered something to Jolene; then they both sniffed and stuck their noses in the air.

When Tessie came back down the aisle, I scooted over so she could sit next to me, but she shuffled clear to the back pew.

Up under the coffin Tessie had left a Mason jar full of half-wilted pink carnations. They seemed a lot more appropriate than the red and white arrangement covering the foot of the casket and the big yellow wreath with the "Beloved Uncle" ribbon across it. I don't know why Jolene and Francine insisted on getting so many flowers, anyway. Uncle Elmo already smelled a whole lot better dead than he had alive.

I glanced around the chapel once more. Marian Milton wasn't there. I'd called and left a message telling her about

Uncle Elmo, and I could feel my face get red just thinking about it. Mrs. Milton was an important woman, the wife of a senator. Why would she want to attend the funeral for an old bum? Why would she even have cause to remember Uncle Elmo and me?

"Seems like I've been invisible all my life, boy . . ." His familiar words echoed through my mind.

Uncle Elmo hadn't always been a bum. When my folks were killed and I'd gone to live with him, he was a chauffeur for Senator Milton. Of course, Milton was just a young lawyer then, but he lived like a king on his wife's money.

"Seems like I've been invisible all my life, boy. People don't treat a chauffeur like he's a real person. Act like you're deaf and dumb and don't have no damned brains, either." Then he'd take a long pull on the bottle. "I could sure tell some stories if I had a mind to."

And more recently, "Nobody looks at a bum, boy. All they see is a dirty hand out. Bet I could murder somebody and nobody'd be able to identify me." He'd take a long pull on the bottle. "I been invisible all my life."

Jim Foley, the undertaker, walked over and stood beside Uncle Elmo's feet, and asked us to bow our heads in prayer.

Then he mentioned each of us relatives by name and talked about how Uncle Elmo had taken me in when I was orphaned at the age of twelve. I blinked fast to keep the tears from rolling out. That was the only good deed out of his whole miserable life we'd been able to come up with.

During the last prayer, my mind wandered back to the money. I'd done a lot of thinking about it last night, and the way I figured, unless they'd started giving out a Nobel Prize for crud, Uncle Elmo hadn't come by our inheritance legally. His panhandling and dumpster diving barely brought in enough to keep a scroungy roof over his head and booze in his belly.

I knew the police had checked the serial numbers on the bills, and they weren't from a bank holdup or a kidnapping ransom. Burglary? Uncle Elmo couldn't have cat-burgled a graveyard at midnight without waking the dead. Robbery? He might have knocked them out with his breath, but otherwise he couldn't have strong-armed a pissant. So what then?

We all filed by the casket to have a last look at Uncle Elmo before he was cremated. Jolene took hold of my arm and boo-hooed, but when we got outside, I noticed her mascara wasn't smeared.

"Are you coming back to the house for refreshments, Frank?" Jolene stashed the wrinkled tissue in her bosom, where it disappeared without a trace. "I made some of those meatballs you like so well."

I don't like her meatballs. "No, I've got to get Uncle Elmo's room cleaned out and haul everything to the dump. Might as well get it over with."

Francine sidled up to her sister. They looked like before and after pictures in a diet ad. Francine couldn't have hidden a matchstick in her bosom without its showing. "We were hoping to get a chance to talk to you, Frankie." Her youngest towhead wiped his nose on her green skirt.

"Just because I was made administrator of the estate this morning doesn't mean I'll get my money any faster than you." I started to walk away.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Big-shot!" Jolene's husband, George, hollered. "If you find any more money while you're going through Elmo's things, you just remember that two-thirds of it belongs to the girls here."

I turned and stared into George's bloodshot eyes. "If I found another million, it wouldn't be enough to pay me for having to clean out that pigsty. But if you're so all-fired concerned, why don't you come help me?"

They were scrambling for their cars when I spotted Tessie coming out of the bushes alongside the funeral home, struggling with her two overflowing shopping bags.

I knew better than to try to help her with those bags, but I ambled beside her until we reached my tan Chevy pickup.

She set the bags down and sagged against the fender. "I'm goin' to miss that old coot."

"I tried to find you to tell you about Uncle Elmo." I'd spent part of yesterday afternoon wandering the downtown streets and Capitol Park.

"Been in the county hospital with pneumonia again. Heard about it when I got out this morning." Pain pulled the wrinkles in her face close together.

"I'll give you a lift downtown."

"Don't do me any favors, booger nose."

I didn't pay any attention to the names she called me. That's just Tessie. Some days she's sweet as pie, and other times she's meaner than cat spit.

The only person she was always nice to was Uncle Elmo. And in my eyes, that made her the Mother Theresa of bag ladies.

"I'm not doing you a favor. I have to go down to Uncle Elmo's room, anyway."

A few curly whiskers on her

chin glinted in the sunlight, and she squinted her eyes. "He'd still be alive if I hadn't took sick. I stopped him a hunnert times from eatin' them pies the bakery throws out, 'specially in the summertime. But he was a fool for whopped cream."

Uncle Elmo hadn't exactly gone out in a blaze of glory. He'd died of food poisoning in the fourth floor john of the Essex Hotel. Only we called it the Sex Hotel because by the time Uncle Elmo moved in, the first two letters on the neon sign had burned out.

Tessie crammed her shopping bags into the cab of the truck, and I gave her a boost up. We were only about eight blocks from downtown, so I knew she was still pretty sick when she agreed to ride with me.

In spite of what I'd said to Francine and Jolene, I was looking forward to going through Uncle Elmo's room. The money he'd left was better than a kick in the head, but after they took out for probate costs and taxes, then split it three ways, I wasn't exactly going to be independently wealthy. I was more interested in where he'd gotten the money, and I had a feeling I'd find the answer in one of those piles of junk in his room. If Uncle Elmo had found a goose that laid golden eggs, I wasn't going to let it die.

I tried to imagine how it would be not to have my back aching every minute of every day and night. I'd doubled my pot planting this year, figuring to put the excess money toward an early retirement. It would have worked out fine if Mrs. Ormsby hadn't joined the garden club and given a tour of her yard. Those garden club folks may be square, but they know marijuana when they see it.

Mrs. Ormsby hadn't bought my story that it was a new variety of Japanese maples. She fired me and threatened to call the police, so I'd spent a busy night sneaking around town, pulling up weeds. That was two months ago, and those plants would have been nearly mature now. A dozen pots of gold.

"This ain't the way to the hotel, you jackass."

"I'm taking you to the rescue mission, Tessie. You're in no shape to be on the streets." I stopped for a red light just as she started pounding on my arm.

"I ain't goin' to no mission. I'm goin' to Elmo's room with you. He promised me some stuff and you ain't gettin' it."

I took hold of her fist until I felt her relax. "I guess you heard that Uncle Elmo left a lot of money."

"I guess."

"Did he ever tell you where he got it?"

"Nope."

Something flickered through her eyes that made me think she was lying. I didn't relish having her look over my shoulder while I went through his things, but just maybe she could help me out. She'd been close to Uncle Elmo for a long time.

When the light turned green, I made a U-turn and headed for the hotel. Of course, I was his nephew *and* his foster son, and he'd never told me about it, so maybe she wasn't lying.

I parked in the bus station lot next to the hotel so Tessie wouldn't have far to walk. Even so, rivers of sweat were rolling off her face by the time we reached the lobby. It was pushing ninety degrees in the shade by then, and she was still wearing her coat and her whole wardrobe under it.

The lobby smelled like Uncle Elmo, multiplied by about fifty, and the sign on the elevator was yellow and curled at the corners, the writing so faded I could barely read "Out of Order" on it.

Tessie stood about six feet away at the foot of the stairs while I got the key from the desk clerk. Stan is a 'Nam vet like me, but his soul is still missing in action. A camouflage T-shirt tried to stretch around his belly, but several inches of white, hairy flab showed between the bottom of

his shirt and the top of his pants. He didn't bother to tell me he was sorry about Uncle Elmo.

Tessie didn't seem to know when I walked up beside her. She was busy giving Stan the evil eye, and I about half expected to see him turn into a horned toad.

I took Tessie's elbow and we spent the next ten minutes getting her up the stairs to the fourth floor. On the second floor landing she handed me her shopping bags, so I knew she was in big trouble. By the third floor, I was holding onto her real tight to keep her from tripping on the loose carpet threads, and by the fourth, I was nearly carrying her.

She sagged against the wall while I jiggled the key in the door. That's when I found out the lock didn't work. It's a wonder the money was still around for the cops to find.

I helped Tessie lie down on Uncle Elmo's bed. I wouldn't have lain on it if I'd been dying, but it probably seemed real inviting to her.

"Did the hospital give you any medicine to take?" Even in the dim light I could see that her eyes looked glazed over, and she was shivering at the same time sweat was pouring down her face.

She put a trembling claw into her coat pocket and found the

prescription bottle. "Just . . . want . . . my . . . stuff. Elmo . . . promised."

It didn't take a genius to know that whatever he'd promised was important to her. "What stuff, Tessie? Tell me and I'll find it for you."

"Can't . . . you'll . . . take . . . it."

"No, I won't. If he promised it to you, it's yours." I walked to the basin in the corner, rinsed the mold out of a cracked mug, then filled it with cold water.

Tessie took the two antibiotic capsules I handed her, then gulped the water. I straightened her on the bed and had turned to walk away when I heard her mumble.

"What, Tessie?"

"Pictures . . ." She was talking to herself in a feverish way, staring at the autographed picture of Mr. and Mrs. Milton hanging over the bed.

Imagine that. She'd gone through all of this to get some pictures. I'd rummage around and see if I could find some of Uncle Elmo in his chauffeur's uniform. I'd probably run across a few while I was looking for my buried treasure.

I opened the door and pried up the window to get a little fresh air, but what came in was mostly diesel fumes from the bus depot below.

Tessie began snoring while I was deciding where to start

looking. The room was decorated in brown and dust—brown window, brown sink, and brown boxes piled almost to the ceiling, with a few brown paper bags for accents. And the remains of a cream pie, just a couple of pieces, brown with age and insects. The only thing missing was the battered brown metal box the police had found the money in while they were looking for the name and address of Uncle Elmo's next of kin.

My fingers skidded over dust as I hauled a box from the top of the heap. I sat in a straight-backed chair with most of the cane bottom gone. Only two of the legs reached the floor, but it was the only chair in the room.

The box was full of loose snapshots, and there were plenty of Mr. Milton—leaning against the limousine, sitting by the pool, walking into his office.

Lowell Milton had political ambitions, but he had a lot more, too. He was the kind of man who could walk into a room full of fancy-dressed people and make them look like a bunch of slobs. And when he started to talk, people around him just naturally hushed up. That stockbroker ad on TV always reminds me of him.

His wife Marian was real shy. They said she was plain and awkward, but that was a

lie. She had the saddest, most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen. And she was never clumsy around me. The household help used to say, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." They'd laugh like crazy about it because Mrs. Milton's money originally came from hog ranching.

But it looked like she'd have the last laugh. The polls were predicting a landslide victory for Milton in the governor's race. I'd seen the two of them on TV a few nights earlier, and anybody would have to admit that Mrs. Milton has turned into a real handsome woman. She stood there smiling, just as cool and calm as you please. I suppose she stopped drinking when the senator got "born again."

Anyway, I moved into Uncle Elmo's apartment over the garage when I was twelve. He cut a dashing figure in those days, kind of like a short Errol Flynn. He looked taller in his chauffeur's uniform, with the hat cocked to one side. And I guess I wasn't the only one he impressed. Two or three nights a week one of the girls who worked in the main house would climb the stairs, and I'd end up sleeping in the back seat of the limo.

I'd thought Uncle Elmo was the luckiest person I knew, driving an important man around in a fancy car. But he

saw it different. Like it was Mr. Milton's main goal in life: just to make him miserable.

"Left me sitting there for two hours while he went inside where it was cool, drinking and eating, and God knows what else. Was he worried about me sitting out in the hot sun with nothing to do? Hell, no!" Then Uncle Elmo would throw his hat on the floor and stomp to the kitchen cabinet where he kept a bottle of bourbon.

I'd asked Mrs. Milton if I could help out around the place after school, and she'd let me work with the gardener. By the time my first Christmas with Uncle Elmo came around, I'd saved enough money to buy him a camera, complete with flash attachment.

"Now you'll have something to do while you wait, Uncle Elmo." I'd crossed my fingers and held my breath while I watched him unwrap it.

He didn't thank me in words, but for the next several years that camera never left his side.

My life from twelve to seventeen was well-documented in that dusty box. Mostly I was weeding or mowing grass, but there were some pictures of me planting the rose garden around the patio. That had been my idea. Mrs. Milton used to spend a lot of time there, and I wanted to build a hedge around her to protect her from prying eyes

when she was sobbing. But it had to be a pretty hedge.

I studied the picture of Mrs. Milton with her arm around my shoulder while I leaned against a shovel. She'd spent nearly every day with me the summer I put in the rose garden. I didn't know at first that her lemonade was different from the glasses she brought me. After about her fourth glass, she'd start talking about Mr. Milton.

"I'm so proud of him. I wouldn't be surprised if he was president someday. Can you imagine me as the first lady?" Or, "I know he just married me for my money. But I've got it arranged so he'll *never* get control of it." Or, "I don't deserve that man. No matter what I do, I'll never be good enough for him." Or, "He'd leave me in a minute if I didn't give him all this. You'd think he'd be satisfied, but all he does is badger me for more and more." She never seemed to feel the same way about him two days in a row.

And that jumbled up my own feelings. I liked it best when she was mad at him. Part of me did, anyway. The other part wanted to hurt Mr. Milton for making her sad and angry. But I'd feel sick to my stomach when she said she loved him.

I shook the contents out of a big manila envelope. A black and white eight by ten of a

gawky kid with a burr haircut and an army uniform stared back at me. There was still innocence in those eyes, but I knew it had disappeared by my next birthday. The scrawled letters with the photograph told the story of my next two years in 'Nam. They were limp and torn at the creases, so I guess Uncle Elmo must have read them more than once.

Uncle Elmo got fired six months before I was due to graduate from high school. He wouldn't talk about it, but I figured the Miltons had either found out about the parade of women coming to our apartment or they'd discovered the flask he kept in the glove compartment of the limo. It was a shame because the last few weeks he'd been whistling and singing love songs that must have been popular before I was born. He hadn't beat on me for a while, either.

Getting fired was the beginning of Uncle Elmo's downfall. It didn't exactly point me down the road to success, either.

"Don't waste your time finishing school, boy. Enlist in the army now. At least you'll get to decide what you want, and they'll train you for a good job later on. Otherwise, they'll draft you soon as you graduate and you'll have to take whatever they dish out."

That was the last piece of ad-

vice I ever took from Uncle Elmo. That first white-knuckle flight over the jungle made me realize I probably wasn't going to have a brilliant civilian career as a side-door gunner. It made me wonder if I had to worry about a career at all.

I set the box aside and walked to the bed. Tessie was snoring lustily, and she felt a little cooler. I looked at my watch. An hour had passed. I'd better improve my time on the next ump-teen boxes, or I'd end up paying another month's rent on this scummy room.

I shuffled through another thousand or so pictures quickly. Lots of street scenes, squirrels in Capitol Park, and "glamor" pictures of women who'd worked for the Miltons, but not a single shot of Uncle Elmo.

"Seems like I've been invisible all my life, boy . . ."

Maybe he'd been right. A shiver ran up my back. What if I'd snapped his picture? Would he have shown up on the film?

My stomach growled, and I tried to rub away the ache behind my eyes. I stretched, checked on Tessie, then walked to the window. City lights blinked back at me, and a soft breeze fluttered my hair. I'd finish the box I was working on, then call it a night.

There was a lot more of the same until near the bottom of the box. I pulled out a large

white envelope and held it to the light. "Insurance Policies" was written on it in Uncle Elmo's spidery hand. At least it was a break in the routine.

I unsealed the flap and reached inside. I nearly shoved everything back when I saw it was more pictures and negatives, but I looked at the top one, then gave a low whistle.

They say that clothes make the man, and I guess they're right. Senator Milton didn't look so important with his off. But it was the women who caught my attention. Not only were they all beautiful, not one of them was his wife. I knew that at least two of them had worked in his law firm.

I'd just become the beneficiary of Uncle Elmo's insurance policies.

I imagined walking into Senator Milton's office and saying, "Pay up, or I'll get you fired." That struck me funny and I laughed until my sides ached.

Then I thought of Mrs. Milton. If push came to shove, could I expose the senator, knowing it would bring pain and shame on her? No, I didn't have to worry about that. He'd keep paying. He'd be paying for all the times he'd made her cry. I wasn't a helpless young boy any more. I had the power now to hurt him.

I heard heavy footsteps on the stairs.

"Wait a minute, boys, I've got to catch my breath." Cousin Jolene's high-pitched voice sliced through the thin walls. "My God, I've never been in any place like this. The city ought to tear it down."

"Well, there won't be much left of Elmo's room when we get through with it." I recognized George's voice before they started laughing.

Francine's husband, Ted, joined in. "We never should have let Frank come up here alone. You know if he's found more money he's not going to tell us about it."

The men sounded like they were about three-quarters tanked.

My heart began thumping as I glanced around the room looking for a place to hide the "insurance policies."

"If there's anything in that room worth keeping, we'll find it. Even if Frank's got it stuffed in his pockets. Come on, Jolene, get your fat butt in gear."

I clutched the white envelope, listening to the footsteps draw closer. Only a few more feet...

The knock on the door sounded like thunder. "Frankie, are you in there? It's Jolene, Frankie."

I couldn't let them find the pictures, but no place seemed safe from their prying fingers.

"Frankie?"

"Oh hell, Jolene, he's not here. Try the doorknob."

"Wait! The door's locked." I must have shouted because Tessie snorted, then rolled onto her side.

Suddenly I saw a hiding place. I took two steps and shoved the envelope deep inside one of Tessie's shopping bags. She was sick, but I knew she'd fight like a tiger if anyone touched those bags.

I opened the door, then stepped back as Jolene plowed into the room, breaking trail for George and Ted.

"We got to thinking, Frankie, and it just didn't seem fair for you to have to do all this work yourself, so we've come to help. Isn't that right, boys?" Jolene wore a pair of tight blue jeans, and from the waist down she looked like a walking sausage. About fifteen pounds of displaced fat had erupted over the waistband and settled under her T-shirt at the foot of the Grand Teton mountains. I knew it was the Tetons pictured in Day-Glo blue because it said so in big letters, but neither God nor the artist would have recognized those mountains.

"Where's Francine?" I'd looked, and she wasn't hidden behind Jolene.

"Somebody had to stay home with the kids." Ted isn't a bad looking fellow. He still has most of his dark hair and a pretty

good build. But every once in a while, especially when he's had a few beers, Ted's left eyeball takes a notion to wander around on its own. At that moment, it was examining the bridge of his nose.

George kicked the bed. "Who's this old broad?"

Tessie squirmed around some, then blinked her eyes.

Jolene gasped and brought a hand up to her mouth. "My God, it's the old woman from the funeral. What's she doing here?"

"I told her she could stay."

Tessie was struggling to get up. I didn't know where we'd put her if she made it. The room was already wall to wall people.

"She's not staying. We've got work to do and private things to talk about." George grabbed Tessie's arm.

"Don't touch her, George. She's probably got cooties. Ted, make George let go of her."

"Get your hands off me, maggot mouth." Tessie landed a weak punch on George's Budweiser belt buckle.

"Jolene, shut up! And, all of you, leave Tessie alone. She's sick."

"Well, it's her own fault. Living the way she does, not keeping herself clean." Jolene sniffed, then pulled a pair of orange rubber gloves from her purse.

Tessie was on her feet now, reaching for her shopping bags. "Get outta my way, you scab

eatin' wienie." She dug an elbow into Ted's ribs.

"You don't have to leave, Tessie." I didn't want her, or her shopping bags, out of my sight.

"I ain't staying where I ain't wanted."

We jostled our way to the door. Should I go with her? What if my relatives found more money or, heaven forbid, more "insurance policies" while I was gone?

"Tessie, wait down in the lobby. I'll come get you when we're through here." I watched her shuffle toward the stairs, carrying my future with her. "And take some more of your medicine," I called.

When I went back in the room, George had a knife in his hand.

"Guess I'll start with the mattress. Ted, you hold that end while I rip her open." George has the biggest Adam's apple I've ever seen. Looks like a mouse running up and down his skinny throat.

"George, hand me that picture first. It might be worth something if Milton gets elected governor." Jolene had spotted the autographed picture hanging over the bed.

"Leave it alone. You didn't even know the Miltons."

"Why, Frankie, I believe you've still got a crush on that woman. I'll be surprised if he gets elected, what with *her* being

locked up in that mental institution and all. I'm not going to vote for him, are you, boys?"

"Jolene, that's ridiculous. Where'd you hear a thing like that?"

She puffed out her chest. "I read it in the newspaper."

"Which newspaper?" I thought if I pinned her down she'd have to admit she'd made it up.

"I forget. It was one of those at the grocery store, by the checkout counter. Anyway, it was a long time ago." Jolene snapped on her rubber gloves. The fingers were about half an inch too long.

"You can't believe a tenth of what you read in those things."

"Oh yeah? Well, Mr. Know-It-All, how about when she went to the Betty Ford Center for her 'alcohol' problem? That was in the *Sacramento Bee*. Only, anybody with an ounce of sense knows that was a coverup. She was probably treated for cocaine. All those rich people use it, you know."

"Jolene, just shut up!" I could hear blood pounding against my eardrums. I clenched my fists and turned my back to her.

George had ripped the mattress apart, and balls of compressed kapok littered the floor.

"Nothing in here. Let's start on the boxes." Ted grabbed the nearest one and began pawing through it.

"That'll take too long. Just

dump it on the floor. If anything interesting falls out, we'll take a closer look at it." George grabbed a box and upended it.

"Wait a minute. I'm the administrator of the estate and I'm responsible for all this stuff." They ignored me.

We all bumped butts for the next two hours. Jolene finally sat on the floor and began spreading stuff out with the palms of her hands. She couldn't pick anything up with those floppy-fingered gloves.

I tried to watch everything that came tumbling out. George found Uncle Elmo's "glamor photos." I saw him glance at Jolene, then grab a handful of the pictures and stuff them inside his shirt.

Uncle Elmo had kept everything he ever found on the streets, and pretty soon we were knee-deep in broken can openers, watchbands, mismatched earrings, small auto parts, fast food containers filled with nuts and bolts, rolls of string, leaky batteries, bent forks, and matchbooks.

Ted kept one eye on his work and the other on things in general.

When I'd walked into that room earlier, I hadn't thought it could get any worse. Just shows how wrong a man can be.

Jolene stretched, then shivered, and it looked like an earthquake had hit the Grand

Tetons. "I feel like I've got bugs crawling all over me. I told you we wouldn't find anything."

George patted the front of his shirt, and I saw a little grin twitch at the corners of his mouth. "Well, we had to see for ourselves."

Ted looked at me, and at the picture over the bed. "Guess we'll be going now."

"Wait, you can't leave. What about this mess?"

"We'd like to help you, Frankie, but we've got to get home and get the kids to bed." Jolene's rear end was covered with dust and there was a piece of masking tape stuck to her like a tail. It wagged at me as she waddled down the hall.

I kicked a path through the rubble. My back was going to ache like fury by the time I got all that junk packed up again. Then I smiled. At least I'd gotten the only things worth having. With luck, this would be my last backache.

Cripes! I'd forgotten about Tessie.

The stuffed chair in the corner of the lobby was empty.

"Where's Tessie?" I panted.

Stan looked up from his *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

"I kicked her out of here as soon as she came downstairs." He moved a toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Why? She wasn't hurting anything."

"She's sick and I don't want her croaking here. Bad enough your uncle croaked. Worst thing in the world, cleaning up after the croakers." Stan's right forearm carried a tattoo of a bayonet with blood dripping from it.

"Yeah, you strike me as the type who'd have a delicate stomach. Besides, who says she's sick?"

"I do. I'm the one that called the ambulance when she passed out here three or four nights ago." He acted like that made him some kind of hero. "She came to while they were loading her up and she started spitting and calling us names. Ugly old hag."

I've never claimed to be the smartest guy in the world, but now I couldn't believe how dense I'd been. Pictures. She didn't want pictures of Uncle Elmo. She wanted the ones I'd stashed in her bag. And the money. Why hadn't she taken the money?

"Stan, try to remember what night she was here. Was it right after Uncle Elmo died?"

He looked thoughtful until I reached for my wallet and handed him a ten dollar bill.

"No, it was before he croaked. I remember because I saw her sneaking a pie upstairs, and even that crazy old hag wouldn't take a pie to a dead man." Stan switched the toothpick back to the other side of his mouth.

"They're not supposed to have food in the rooms, on account of it attracts bugs."

I could tell that was one of their big concerns. "Did you try to stop her?"

"No, I didn't want the damned thing. Had dirt all over the whipped cream."

"And you're sure she gave that pie to Uncle Elmo?"

"Look, man, I don't know what she did with the damned pie. She was upstairs about half an hour, then she came back down, gaspin' and wheezin' like she was on her last legs. I know she didn't have the pie with her then 'cause she would have fell in it when she passed out." Stan scratched his left armpit. "I called an ambulance 'cause I didn't want her croaking in the lobby." He could stand to beef up his vocabulary.

I raced next door to the bus depot and searched the waiting room. A couple of derelicts were slumped on the wooden seats snoring, but no Tessie. Where the hell could she be?

She couldn't have gone far, but there were hundreds of hiding places in the few blocks around the hotel. And Tessie probably knew them all.

I walked east, toward Capitol Park, checking doorways, stumbling down dark alleys.

The park is cool and inviting by day, but now the trees and shrubbery loomed like bullies,

blocking the street lights—their shadows erasing the footpaths, their foliage deadening the city noises, surrounding me with lonely night sounds. A bird's call was answered by a wino's snore. The breeze shifted, spraying me with drops of water from the sprinklers.

Gradually my eyes adjusted to the blackness, and my footsteps quickened, boot heels sounding hollow against the paved path. As I worked my way deeper into the park, small creatures darted behind me, disappearing into the damp grass.

Then there was another sound behind me—human voices whispering, soft, slow footsteps. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the outlines of two men about fifty feet away. It was impossible to judge their size against the background of trees and shadows, but they seemed to take up a lot of space. I picked up my pace, and they adjusted theirs to mine.

Faint music came somewhere from my left. It sounded like the kind of music they play in movies that makes you want to yell, "Get out of there, you idiot. You're going to get killed." But the idiot always keeps going, and he always gets killed. I broke into a run.

I ran toward the lighted capitol building far ahead. Their footsteps grew closer, but I didn't

turn. A spider web slapped my face. I was outrunning my night vision. The path turned and dipped. I stumbled, windmilling my arms for balance, then lurched forward onto one knee. I pushed off from a starting stance, their heavy breathing so close I could almost feel it on the back of my neck.

My throat was on fire, my knee throbbing, and I knew I couldn't maintain the pace. A low tree limb brushed my shoulder. I grabbed onto it, pushed it as far as it would go, then let it snap back. I heard a swoosh, then a cry of pain, and I regained some of my lost ground.

Finally I burst out of the darkness into a ring of light. I was within calling distance of the guard in front of the capitol building. The sounds behind me stopped.

I trotted down the lighted driveway to the street, then leaned against a lamp post, gasping for breath.

If Tessie was in the park, she'd have to wait until daylight.

My stomach was growling seriously now. I ignored my aching knee and started walking, past boarded up buildings, past a four story parking garage. So many places to hide in the dark. I felt like a volunteer victim. Might as well be wearing a sign saying MUG ME.

The streets were nearly deserted, and I turned to look as a police car came up behind me, rolling by slowly, splashing me with light.

Finally, I'd come full circle. The SEX HOTEL was ahead, only now it was the EX HOTEL.

I limped through the bus depot waiting room again. The coffee shop was closed, so I got a couple of candy bars from a machine against the wall.

My legs told me to sit a while. The rest of my body told me to go home and get some sleep, but my mind told me not to listen to them.

At daylight, I was back in the bus depot, wolfing down pancakes, eggs, and bacon. And drinking coffee to keep awake and warm my insides. I'd roused a dozen bums during the night. A few had been friends of Uncle Elmo's, but most were strangers. None of them had seen Tessie.

I decided to go into the park again as soon as I'd finished breakfast. But it felt so good just sitting there with a full stomach. I was sopping up the last of the egg yolk with a piece of pancake when it dawned on me.

When was the last time Tessie ate? Sick as she was, she was probably getting hungry by now. If she was still alive.

I parked my pickup in front

of the Salvation Army building and spent the next half hour yawning, forcing my eyes to stay open, watching the line grow longer. I nearly missed Tessie because I was concentrating hardest on the people going in, not the few who straggled out. She must have been one of the first in line.

She looked up when I called to her. I hoped she wouldn't make a fuss about going back to Uncle Elmo's room with me. The last thing I needed was a scene on the street. If I tried to get those pictures from her now, I'd probably get arrested for mugging a bag lady.

I opened the passenger door and slid out.

Tessie had that feverish look again, but at least she was still alive. She twisted away when I grabbed her elbow. I held tight, and she gave up the struggle. She never said a word when I helped her into my pickup.

Somehow I found the strength to drag Tessie up the stairs to Uncle Elmo's room. I threw the flat mattress over the bed-springs, then plopped her down on top of it.

"You killed Uncle Elmo. You killed the only relative who meant a damn to me." I'd worked myself up pretty good by then.

"You crazy geek, get away." She tried to spit on me, but her

lips just sputtered and nothing came out.

"It won't do you any good to lie, Tessie. After the funeral, you told me he died from eating tainted whipped cream. I didn't even know that, just that he died of food poisoning. You'd only been out of the hospital a few hours, but you knew all about it. Even knew about the money."

She struggled to sit up. "Talk gets around fast on the street."

"You brought him that pie. You were going to give him long enough to die, then come back for the money and the pictures. Only you were too sick to do it. If Stan hadn't called the ambulance . . ."

"I'm goin' to kill that cob-knocker, too. He didn't have no right callin' an ambulance. I jest needed a few minutes to rest." Her eyes blazed. "So what if I did kill Elmo? What are you goin' to do about it?"

I thought about killing Tessie. But thinking about it and doing it are two different things. I even thought about hiring Stan for the job. I figured he'd do it for fifty bucks.

"I never want to see you again, old woman. I know where Uncle Elmo was getting the money, and I have the pictures." I plunged my hand into one of her shopping bags and rummaged around. The envelope wasn't there.

I ignored Tessie clawing at me and dumped the other shopping bag upside down. About a dollar's worth of empty soda cans rolled out, and a pair of men's high-topped sneakers. But the pictures weren't there either.

"I already found them pictures, and I hid 'em real good." She was quiet for a minute. "I've got somethin' else you ain't." She leaned forward and hissed, "I know *how* he was doin' it and *where* he was pickin' the money up."

Then I remembered something. If it had struck me last night, I'd have probably thought about committing suicide, but now it made me laugh. "It won't do you any good. I called Mrs. Milton and told her Uncle Elmo was dead. I expect she's told the senator by now. There won't be any more money coming in."

Tessie started cackling. "Frank, you ain't got the sense God give a goose. The senator doesn't know it was Elmo blackmailin' him."

That made me pause. I didn't know squat about blackmail, but Uncle Elmo had.

"How was he doing it?"

"I ain't going to tell you."

"What if I just tell the cops you murdered Uncle Elmo?"

"What if I jest tell them you're plannin' to blackmail the senator, jest like Elmo did? They'll take away all that money they found, and nobody'll get nothin'."

"The cops aren't going to believe anything you say, Tessie. Even if they did, do you think Senator Milton would admit he's been paying blackmail all these years? Hell, no. On the other hand, I have a witness who saw you take Uncle Elmo that pie." I pointed toward the crawling mess in the aluminum foil dish. "I'll bet your fingerprints are all over it." I just stood there staring at her while she thought it over.

Finally, she said, "I'll give you half, but that's all."

I was disappointed, but she was a sick old woman. How much longer could she live, a year or two?

"Okay, Tessie. It's a deal." I shook a couple of antibiotic capsules into my hand and made her take them.

Tessie wiped at the water dribbling down her chin. "Every time I go to the hospital, the doctors say if I took care of myself, I could live another fifteen or twenny years. So I'm gonna go to one of them retirement homes, soon as I start gettin' that money. They got dining rooms and maid service . . ."

That almost cut it. If I'd had fifty dollars, I'd have run downstairs and offered it to Stan.

"Besides, it ain't like I didn't earn it. Took me years to wheedle it outta the ol' buzzard. I didn't even know how much money he had until a coupla

weeks ago when he showed it to me. I said, 'Elmo, how come you ain't spent this money. You could be on Easy Street.' And you know what he said? He said, 'That ain't money, that's *power*.' So I told him what the doctors said about my health, and you know what he said?" Tessie squinted her eyes shut, and a tear rolled down one of the creases in her cheek. "He said, 'I ain't wastin' none of my *power* on an ugly old woman.'"

Tessie started snuffling, so I dug a handkerchief out of my back pocket and handed it to her.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road and get us both some money." I hope Uncle Elmo didn't know I was making a deal with his murderer.

She told me how the first of every month Uncle Elmo went to the post office and picked up a brown envelope addressed to Mr. Jim Beam, care of General Delivery. Uncle Elmo had used his best friend's name.

"How much was he getting every month?"

"A thousan' dollars in twenny dollar bills. Must pack them envelopes plumb full."

I felt my heart sink down around my knees. Five hundred a month wasn't going to buy me retirement in a hot tub.

But then I started thinking. What if I upped the blackmail to account for inflation? The

way I figured, Senator Milton didn't want to take a chance on a third party finding out about those pictures, so as long as I kept the demands reasonable, he probably wouldn't hire anybody to track us down. Of course, if I started asking for a million dollars a month, well, that's enough for a man to take a gamble.

"How does three thousand a month sound, Tessie? Half for each of us."

Her toothless grin answered my question.

Fifteen hundred wasn't a fortune, but with that and the money in probate, a single man could get by. Besides, I could keep upping the ante a little without telling Tessie.

I rooted around in the rubble until I came up with a smudged piece of paper and a crumpled envelope, then wrote the letter to Senator Milton.

On the first of the month, I picked Tessie up and we drove to the post office. There was no envelope for Jim Beam.

The next day I asked Tessie if she was sure we were at the right post office.

"'Course I'm sure. I come here with him twice't."

But after I dropped Tessie off, I went around and checked all the branch offices.

On the third of the month, when there still was no enve-

lope for Jim Beam, I caught myself looking at Tessie, wondering if she'd sneaked down there ahead of me. And I know she was wondering the same about me because she kept pounding on me, saying, "You little wart, you snuck down here and took all the money fer yerself."

By the fourth day, I was getting goosy. I knew the senator had hired someone to hunt me down, and I had a horrible, creepy feeling between my shoulder blades as we left the post office.

There was a guy standing by the newspaper racks on the sidewalk reading a paper. Or pretending to. Probably had a gun trained on me. He wasn't even reading the front page... the front page with the extra big headline that said,

**SENATOR MILTON KILLED,
WIFE CLAIMS SELF DE-
FENSE.**

I dropped three quarters before I got one to go in the slot, and I just let Tessie scramble after them.

The story took up most of the front page, and ran over onto the back page, but the gist of it was: Senator Milton had been blackmailing Mrs. Milton to the tune of two thousand a month for the past umpteen years. But he'd recently demanded six thousand a month, which she refused to pay. The night before, he'd tried to take it out of her hide, and she'd grabbed a gun from the bedside table.

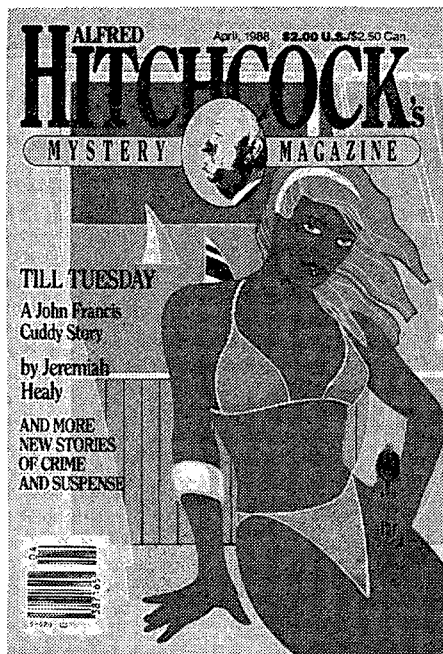
Oh, yeah. He was blackmailing her because he'd caught her having an affair back in 1968. With their chauffeur.

(continued from page 2)

both reservations is due April 1.

New books to watch for by some of "our" authors: *Wall of Glass* by Walter Satterthwait, due from St. Martin's in February; *Pigeon Blood*, the first Inspector Kiet novel, by Gary Alexander, due from Walker in March; and *The Key* by Malcolm McClintick, the second George Kelso novel, published in December by the Doubleday Crime Club. A review of Joel

Helgerson's *Slow Burn* can be found in this issue. And, of course, there's *The Basket Case* by Ralph McInerny, the eleventh Father Dowling novel, which was published in November by St. Martin's. We are very pleased to welcome Mr. McInerny back to AHMM with "The Dutiful Son," a new Father Dowling tale and the priest's first appearance in novella form. (Mr. McInerny's only other story for AHMM appeared in 1980.)



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The Batman of Blytheville

by Robert Loy



“**W**hat do you want to be when you grow up?”

No kid ever graduates from grammar school without having had to answer that question a few thousand times. As I re-

member, I was in the second grade the first time it was posed to me. My grandmother was staying at our house over the Christmas holidays, and one night while my parents were out at a dinner party the duty

of playing the host fell to my seven-year-old hands.

To start off the evening's entertainment, I led my grandmother on a tour through the back pages of the Sears catalogue, carefully pointing out which of the wondrous toys and games on exhibit were not already occupants of my toybox. I did this because I knew from Christmases past that if I did not spell out exactly what I wanted she would probably go out and buy me a lot of silly and useless presents—stuff like clothes.

I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt and assume she did this with well-meant but misguided intentions and not just to torture me. Still, there was no point in taking chances, and I let her know pretty plainly that this year I wanted models and pellet guns, not mittens and underwear. She said nothing, but communicated to me by way of that mystic telepathy little boys and grandmothers share that she got the message. I nestled farther down in her lap while visions of air rifles danced in my head.

"How do you like school this year?" she asked.

"Okay," I responded in that conversation-killing style of second graders.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I had never thought about that before. I was seven years old; the future, beyond the next game of hide-and-seek, did not overly concern me. But I wanted to give her an answer, especially now that we had come to an understanding on the subject of Christmas presents.

"I want to be Batman," I told her.

My grandmother smiled softly to herself and said, "Well, I think that's just fine." But I could tell she was thinking, "Isn't he the cutest little thing?" That's what grownups always did whenever you tried to talk seriously with them.

But it was Christmas time and so I forgave her.

My contemporaries were also being queried as to their future employment plans, and the next day it was the favored topic of debate at the local playground. When I had told my grandmother the previous night that I wanted to be Batman, it was mainly because I couldn't think of anything else on the spur of the moment. After being sent to bed, however, I decided to do a little research on what exactly caped crusaderhood entailed. I hauled out my stack of Detective Comics and my flashlight, pulled the covers up over my head, and read and reread, taking mental notes all the

while on exactly what a Batman was expected to accomplish in a typical workday.

What I discovered excited and amazed me. Batman's job was to beat up bad guys, rescue pretty girls, crack horrible jokes, and generally scare the heck out of people. My definition of the perfect occupation. I had chosen wisely. The message my heart tapped out to my brain was that I had a calling, a grand one.

I realized just how grand as I listened to the other kids discussing their career aspirations. Next to my destiny as a masked vigilante their employment ideals were positively prosaic. Most of the girls wanted to be mommies (this was back in the pre-liberated days), a few planned to become nurses or—of all things—teachers. The boys' aims were only slightly more interesting. They all wanted to be firemen, policemen, or spies—except Arnold, the neighborhood bully, who planned to become a professional wrestler. As I listened to them recite the merits of their various ambitions, I silently weighed their ideals against my goal of life as a Batman. It was no contest. Being a Batman was more rewarding on all counts: more exciting than fighting fires, more dangerous than espionage, and with a much snazzier uniform than the po-

lice department's. When my turn came I was ready to tell them all about it.

"I'm going to be a Batman when I grow up," I said, and then waited for the adulation I knew would come when they realized that a future superhero was in their midst.

But the only reaction was from Arnold and it was not adulatory.

"Ahhhh, you bald-headed baby," he said, "there ain't no such thing as Batman."

"Bald-headed baby" was the worst insult in the back yards and playgrounds of Blytheville, Arkansas. Many was the time I, like every other kid in the neighborhood, came home crying like Judgment Day because the foul epithet had been applied to me. My mother could never understand why it upset me so. No grownup ever could. There is no curse in the adult language that can rival "bald-headed baby" for inflicting pain and indignity on the receiver.

"There is so a Batman," I informed him.

"There is not!"

"Is so!"

"Is not!"

"Is so!"

"Is not!"

This clever colloquy could have gone on all afternoon, and I wouldn't have minded if it had. I just did not want to allow Arnold to shift the method of

settling this dispute from phraseology to fisticuffs, his favorite means of self-expression.

"Prove it," Arnold challenged, and then again compared my appearance to that of a hairless infant.

"I will," I told him.

"Do it then."

"All right," I said, "if Batman's not real, then how come they call it *Detective Comics*? Huh? How come?"

Against such a brilliant display of second grade logic I honestly expected Arnold to throw in the towel. As it turned out, I wasn't even close. What he actually threw was more like a left hook. He hit me three more times before I, deciding to get in some blows of my own, hit the ground. The other kids formed a circle around us and chanted: "Fight! Fight!" which was unnecessary since Arnold and I both knew what it was.

"Get up," Arnold said. It sounded like a dumb idea to me. What I wanted to do was dig myself a hole and burrow my way back home. But then I remembered what my parents had told me, about how Arnold's mother was dead and how he lived alone with his dad. They told me I should always try to be especially nice to Arnold. So, because Arnold wanted me to, I stood up. He immediately knocked me right back down.

"Get up! Get up and fight!"

This was Arnold's one concession to the Marquess of Queensberry: He would not punch your face in while you were down on the ground. I was thankful for that. I took inventory of my injuries and found there were no serious ones, nothing broken or bleeding. I was thankful for that, too, but the audience was disappointed. They had interrupted their games and abandoned the seesaws and jungle gyms to watch this violent spectacle, and they felt cheated when they saw that my eyes weren't black and my teeth were still in my mouth. They were restless, and some of them joined Arnold in urging me to stand up and get punched out again. A couple of them even tried to force me to my feet. Anyone who believes that people are more compassionate than in the days when they cheerfully watched Christians being fed to the lions should pay a visit to their local playground.

As I sat there I thought of something else my mother and father had told me: Any infraction of the rules would be reported to Santa Claus, who would shorten my pile of presents accordingly. Fighting definitely qualified as an infraction. Obviously I couldn't be nice to Arnold, which required my playing punching bag, and please Santa Claus, who

frowned on fighting, at the same time.

"Get up!" Arnold insisted. "Stand up and fight!"

At that point I had no battle scars to take home, so there was no way for my parents, and subsequently Santa Claus, to find out about this scuffle. Although I knew it would result in a significant loss of playground prestige, I decided to quit while there were still no black marks by my name up at the North Pole. I chose not to stand and fight but to sit and refrain from fighting. It was not a popular decision. Eventually, however, Arnold got tired of waiting and plodded off to enjoy another of his hobbies—smashing bullfrogs with a brick—and the bloodthirsty crowd went back to its games.

Finally, I trudged home, bowed but unbloody.

Christmas morning came, and with it my reward for suffering indignity at the balled-up hands of Arnold. Mom, Dad, and Santa, all ignorant of the playground incident, showered me with gifts. I got almost everything I asked for. The only thing missing was the air rifle.

I had no complaints, though. Also missing were the hated "functional" presents, and in their place was neat, fun stuff. Even my grandmother did not

let me down. We compromised. She got me clothes again—a suit, in fact. But what a suit! A grey sweatshirt with a gold circle on the chest, on which was painted the silhouette of a bat in flight, a wide yellow belt with a couple of million secret compartments, black shorts over a pair of leggings that ended in hard-soled blue boots. Accessories included gloves, mask (pointy ears and all), and, best of all, a magnificent dark blue cape, as big, scary, and mysterious as the night sky. This was no cheap Halloween costume, but a genuine Batman suit, complete with sharp ridges on the gloves. I abandoned my other presents, put on the suit, dashed up to my parents' room, and stood before their full-length mirror.

The awesome image of the Batman was what I saw reflected. Oh, it was still recognizable as me, I suppose. The real Batman is taller than three feet eleven inches, and his ribs don't stick out when he is in costume, but I was nonetheless transfigured. The nobility and heroism I carried beneath the cumbersome facade of childhood were now on the outside for all the world to see. If it was not a sight to make "strong men quiver with fear," it at least made me shiver with delight. I practiced Batman-like scowls and jumped up and down

to make the cape unfurl.

"How does it fit?" My dad had entered the room and was watching me while I watched the mirror.

"Great," I answered, without taking my eyes off the fearsome masked man in front of me.

"Bobby and Jenny are outside waiting for you. Why don't you go show them your new costume?"

I looked at my father. I looked back to the mirror; a skinny, seven-year-old boy in a Batman suit stared sadly back at me. The majesty of the costume had flown on little bat-wings out the window, leaving me to feel ridiculous and alone.

Bobby and Jenny were brother and sister, new kids on the block. They had not been present that day at the playground when Arnold tried to beat the innocence out of me. They had not been laughing and calling me a bald-headed bat-baby ever since like the other kids. I had never mentioned Batman to either of them. I was afraid if they too laughed at my dream, my dream would die.

"Tell them I'll be out as soon as I change clothes," I instructed my father.

"Why? Don't you like your Batman costume?" he asked.

"Yessir, but it's cold outside."

I raced to my room and peeled off the gloves and the mask. In keeping with my usual method

of housekeeping, I tossed them into a corner. They landed on my stack of Detective Comics. The beautiful drawing on the cover of the top comic book, depicting Batman grappling with his insane archfoe the Joker, disappeared under a tangled wad of dark fabric.

For the first time in my life I experienced doubt. Was there a Batman? I didn't know. Could there be? I didn't know that either. But I had read enough of his exploits and seen enough of the real world to know there *should* be a Batman. We needed a man who did not allow his sense of justice and fairness to be overcome by advancing cynicism. I needed him. I did not want to grow up into an adult world where the price of admission was my belief in heroes. I needed to know there was someone bigger than me, bigger than anybody, watching over us. Not God. Oh, I believed He was up there watching us, but He seemed content just to spectate. God never came swinging down on a bat-rope when a mugger in the park—or a bully on the playground—threatened you.

I couldn't go outside in this costume in front of Bobby and Jenny. Yet when I tried to untie the cape I experienced another new emotion—self-disgust. I felt like a traitor. So I did what Bruce Wayne, the Batman in

the comic books, did. I put my regular clothes on over the costume and crammed the gloves and mask in my pocket. My heroism and nobility once again safely hidden, I walked outside to meet my friends.

We went to the park, a boring place with absolutely nothing to recommend itself to kids, just benches and unclimbable trees. Bobby and Jenny wanted to go to the playground, but I wasn't up to revisiting Waterloo so soon. Our conversation revolved around what each of us had found under the tree that morning.

"What else did you get?" Jenny asked me, as we all sat down on a dry spot under an old oak. She looked up at me with an interested smile, and I felt myself getting even warmer than I already was under all those layers of fabric.

"Ah, stuff," I said. "You know, lots of stuff." Jenny's smile always made me self-conscious and tongue-tied.

"I got a doll—a Baby Go Wet-Wet—and some toys, but mostly I got new clothes," she told me.

"Me too," her brother Bobby chimed in. "I got new shirts, new trousers, new socks."

I shook my head in commiseration. "Gee, that's too bad. I'm really sorry."

"Why?" asked Bobby. "Clothing is what I asked Mr. Claus to bring me."

I tried to catch his eye to see if he was joking, but his glasses were so thick all I saw were two black pupils as big around as Cadillac tires.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. He brought me this sweater, in fact. Didn't you notice it was new?"

"Yeah," I lied, "yeah, I did, it's nice." My social circle had been reduced to this duo and I wanted to keep both of them, but sometimes with Bobby I wondered if I weren't better off as a pariah. His scholarly prissiness offended me. He reminded me somewhat of Clark Kent, and I knew good and well there was no Superman suit under those new duds he was so proud of.

I certainly had no problem liking his sister, however. I liked Jenny to the point of distraction. I had never had a girlfriend before, so I didn't know if the lightheadedness I experienced in her presence was due to puppy love or iron-poor blood.

"Have you ever seen Santa Claus?" asked Jenny. I had a suave, sophisticated answer, but unfortunately it blew away when she batted her eyelashes at me.

"I wonder how he gets to everybody's house in one night like that?" She looked hopefully up at me, as though she expected me to explain that eternal mystery. More than

anything in the world I wished I could.

"It's simple, sis," Bobby told her. "Mr. Claus travels faster than light."

To my dismay, Jenny turned her adoring gaze from me to her brother. I did not know why because what he had said sounded like nonsense to me. Still, it had evidently impressed her, so I set out to redeem myself by exposing the fallacy in his theory.

"Of course he goes faster than light. Everybody knows that. I mean, he's always finished by the time the sun comes up. I figure it's because he goes real, real fast and skips all the bad people's houses."

I looked at Jenny. I knew a truly scientific explanation like mine was bound to turn her head. But I was too late. Her head had already been turned. She was watching an approaching figure top the ridge.

"Who is that?" she asked. "I've never seen him before."

I had. Coming straight toward us, looking like a muscle-bound Grinch, was my old friend Arnold.

Bobby never saw him coming. He pushed his glasses up his nose and kept on lecturing. "The speed of light is one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second. I'm sure you'll agree that's real, real fast. Still, when you consider the entire rest of the year is

spent in preparation for that one night, the task is not as amazing as it first appears."

"What ain't amazin'?" In his own inimitable style, Arnold joined the conversation. I was staring down at the ground, hoping ostrich-like that if I didn't see Arnold he wouldn't see me.

"We were discussing Santa Claus's feat," Bobby explained.

"Yeah? Well Santa Claus ain't got no feet, and you know why?"

"What? I mean why?"

"Cuz there ain't no Santa Claus. That's why."

I could have, and probably should have, warned Bobby. The poor fool took Arnold's comment as an invitation to debate. I still had my head in the sand, but I could feel Jenny's eyes burning a hole in me, imploring me to save her brother.

"Interesting theory," said Bobby. "But how do you explain the evidence—the gifts, the consumed milk and cookies?"

"Big words," Arnold said. "I guess you think big words make you a big man. But you ain't nothing but a bald-headed baby just like this guy."

The next thing I knew a huge hand grabbed the front of my parka and pulled me skyward. There was a moment of shock before I realized I had left the planet of my birth. I hung there suspended, face-to-ugly-face with Arnold.

"You're a bald-headed baby, ain't you?"

I gurgled something in reply. Owing to the fact that Arnold's paw was wrapped around my throat, I was speechless—not to mention breathless and faint. He relaxed his grip and I stood, wobbly, on my feet.

"I beat you up good the other day, didn't I?"

I nodded.

I was in many ways a naive child, but not naive enough to think that Arnold asked me that question to see if I knew the answer. I knew, even more than he did, how "good" he had beaten me. No, he asked that question because he wanted to impress somebody, and I realized with a feeling of horror and shame that it had to be Jenny. Arnold had assaulted my dreams and now he was trying to steal my girl.

"Do you know what you are?" he asked.

I was silent. I knew I was risking another right hook, but I refused to play straight man at my own public humiliation.

"You're not Batman—you're Chickenman." His face crinkled up into something ghastly, the first time I'd ever seen Arnold smile.

"There ain't no Batman, is there, Chickenman?"

Again I was silent.

"Is there, Chickenman?" Arnold gave me a close-up view of

his right fist. Each knuckle was as big as my head.

"No," I mumbled, hoping Jenny wouldn't hear me or see that my face was on fire.

"Now, Chickenman, tell your buddy Big Words there ain't no Santa Claus neither."

I looked at Bobby. He was studying me impassively, like I was a bug under a microscope or something. I could tell he had no idea what was going on. Then I saw Jenny. She knew exactly what was happening. The look she gave me hurt a lot more than one of Arnold's right hooks. At that moment as I watched her eyes fill with tears I felt far too small to hold all the precious agony she was causing in me—but I wanted it all. There was no room for any other emotion, not even fear.

"There is too a Santa Claus," I screamed at Arnold, tears running down my cheeks, "and a Batman, you big ape! You big bald-headed baby ape!"

And then I ran. I hoped Arnold would chase me and leave Bobby and, especially, Jenny alone. It didn't work.

"Run, Chickenman," Arnold hollered after me. "Run on back to the henhouse. I'll take care of your buddy Big Words."

I ran. I ran from Jenny's eyes, Jenny's tears. Not from Arnold's fists—avoiding them was an unexpected fringe benefit. I tried to take comfort from the

fact that Arnold was not going to beat *me* up, not today anyway. Or had he already?

He had forced me to deny Batman, something he had not been able to accomplish in our first battle. And maybe he was right, maybe there was no Batman. Certainly no one had swooped down and rescued me, cracking corny jokes while effortlessly defeating Arnold. No masked avenger was behind me to save Jenny's virtue and Bobby's hide. If only I were bigger. If only I were grown up.

By now Arnold was probably rearranging Bobby's facial features. Bobby had his faults, but he was my friend and I was responsible for what was happening to him. I had no idea what Arnold would do to Jenny. He might beat her up, too. But he might do something worse, like kiss her. He might kiss her *and* beat her up. Whatever he did, I knew the look Jenny would give me when we next met would be infinitely more painful than the one I was now running from.

It hit me that even if I ran home and cried everything out to Momma she couldn't make this mess "all better" the way she used to. And then I faced that moment that comes in every life, the beginning of the end of childhood. I realized that everything I was running from—Jenny and that look and

the pain that went with it, a "good" beating from Arnold, the responsibility for Bobby's beating—none of it could I escape. No matter which way I ran I would be running straight toward them. And since I was running that way anyway...

I dashed behind the park men's room. I had been a fool to expect someone to swoop down and rescue me. By the same token, I had been a fool to ever doubt the existence of Batman. How could I have forgotten? He was there with me the whole time. I tore off my parka and let him out to spread his wings. I pulled the mask and gloves out of my pocket and put them on. I kicked off my trousers.

The world looked strangely different in some indefinable way when I first saw it through my eyeholes. I did not stop to ponder it, though. I took a big gulp of air and ran. In the right direction this time.

I don't know which was pounding harder—my heart in my chest or my boots on the grass. The wind whistled its approval and the cape unfurled splendidly behind me. I felt like I could run forever. Run? I could fly.

Then I saw them. Arnold was merrily punching away at Bobby's face. Jenny was flailing her little fists on the bully's back in an ineffectual effort to

make him stop. She was the first to see me. Her fists deflated and fell to her sides. She turned into a statue.

I kept running.

It was several seconds before Arnold even noticed that Jenny was no longer attacking his flank. When the realization finally sank in, he let go of Bobby, turned, and followed Jenny's gaze. All three of them forgot themselves at the fearsome sight of a genuine Batman swooping down the hill. Arnold and Jenny stood motionless in wide-eyed amazement. Bobby, who had lost his glasses in the fight with Arnold, stared up in squint-eyed bewilderment.

I kept running. I knew if I stopped to think about what I was doing I'd chicken out. Then I really would have been in trouble because I'd picked up so much speed zooming down the hill I couldn't have stopped if I wanted to. I just kept coming, and when I ran headlong into Arnold's chest he hit the ground with a blow that must have measured a good 7.4 on the Richter scale. I stumbled a few feet and then skidded on my belly. Quickly I disentangled myself from my cape and hopped up. Everything was black! I was blind! I hurriedly adjusted my eyeholes and my vision returned.

Arnold was lying on the ground, seemingly not very

anxious to get up right away. He was clutching his stomach and trying to figure out what had happened. I knew how he felt but I was not sympathetic.

"Get up, Arnold," I heard myself say. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered if I hadn't made a mistake, calling him by his first name like that. I didn't want to jeopardize my secret identity. We Batmen had to be careful about such things. I flexed my bicep, hoping the sight of that puny but formidably arrayed muscle would cover up my faux pas.

Arnold found his feet and stood up.

"Who am I?" I asked, and gave him one of my best Batman scowls.

"You're crazy," he said and drew back his fist. I ducked and delivered a sharp jab to his stomach. Bruce Wayne himself would have been proud of such a move.

"Now who am I?" I shouted. I turned slightly so that Jenny, if she were still standing in the spot I'd last seen her, would get my full profile.

"Batman," Arnold moaned.

"You *bat* I am. You *batter* believe it!" If I hadn't been so busy trying to look menacing I would have burst out laughing. Everything was falling into place. Even the extremely corny jokes came easy.

Next on the agenda was dis-

patching this villain for good. I couldn't very well haul him off to jail as Batman did with his vanquished foes, Arkansas officials being reluctant to imprison second-graders. So I did the next best thing.

"You better get out of here," I snarled at the villain, "before I have to *bat* you around some more."

Since this was the big moment and I wanted to get it all over with while we were both still under the spell of the Batman, I scowled, flexed my biceps, *and* gestured at my utility belt, *and* whooshed my cape around. It worked. Arnold left. Fast.

I watched him go and then allowed myself to breathe for the first time since I had abandoned my street clothes and my childhood back at the restroom. When Arnold was out of sight I turned and looked around. Bobby was on his hands and knees fumbling around for his glasses. It was safe to assume he had missed the whole glorious episode. Ah but Jenny, she had seen it all. She was gaz-

ing up at me with something closely akin to rapture. I felt as uncomfortable as I had when her eyes were full of scorn until I remembered we Batmen have nerves of steel. I gave her a grim little smile as if to say: "Think nothing of it. Danger is my business."

She stood on her tiptoes and whispered in my ear, "I know who you are."

I was horrified.

"No, you don't," I said. "No one knows my secret identity."

She giggled. "You're my hero, that's who you are."

All of a sudden I realized I did not know what I was supposed to do next. The stories in the comic books always ended here, with the bad guys taken care of and the maiden all full of gratitude and adoration. Batman would probably have disappeared off into the night to tackle more bad guys. But it was still early afternoon in Blytheville, Arkansas, and as far as I knew there were no more bad guys. So I gave the grateful maiden my gloved hand and walked her home.

FICTION

Yellow Fever

by John H. Dirckx

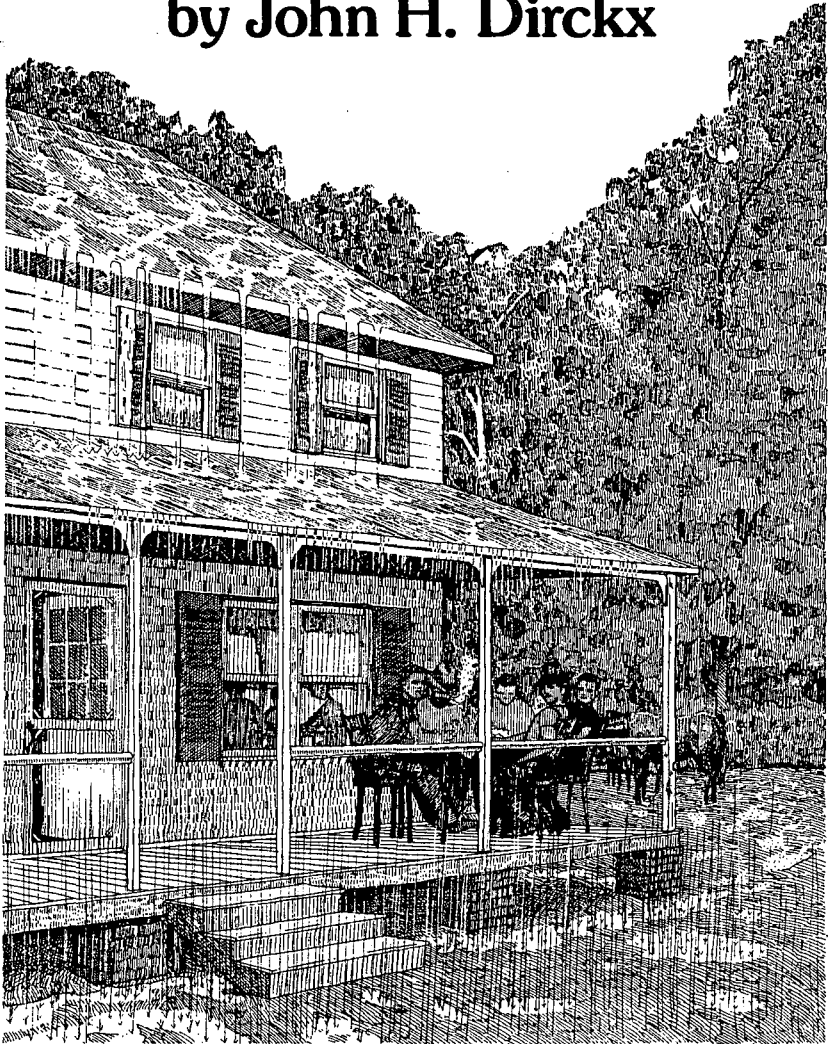


Illustration by Patrick Welsh

Around sundown on a dismal, steaming, rain-bleared day in July, not quite a hundred years ago, two men landed from a flat-bottomed rowboat at Goshen in Dampier Parish, Louisiana. In those days, the only way into or out of Goshen during the rainy season was by water, and these men had evidently had a hard day's rowing up the Littlestone River from its mouth at the Mississippi port named after it.

From the landing stage a solitary dirt road led uphill about a quarter of a mile, between two rows of brick and timber houses, to Wheeler's Inn and Livery Stable, on whose verandah a group of men sat smoking and playing cards. Under their stolid scrutiny the newcomers made their way awkwardly up the slippery road. A steady drizzle filtered down through arching boughs of gum and sassafras trees to feed a hundred rivulets coursing under their feet back toward the river.

The man in the lead, middle-aged and sparely built, picked his way among the ruts with short, quick steps. Behind him stalked a gaunt half-breed with a black box on his shoulder, hatless, his hair plastered to his head and face by the rain. Both were wet to the skin and looked hungry and exhausted.

A second road, running at a right angle to the first, passed before the inn and quickly lost itself in either direction among the trees. The smaller man crossed this road, halted at the foot of the verandah steps, and cast his eye over the half-dozen idlers lounging there about a rickety table on which each had set his glass. One or two of them were manifestly the worse for drink.

"We'd be glad of dry beds for the night, and some refreshment," said he. "Pucket is my name. Federal bank examiner."

The men, their game suspended, studied him with increased interest. Before them in the twilight they saw a wizened, precise personage with flashing, restless, close-set eyes, and a complexion the color of dust and old paper who looked as if he had spent his whole life poring over ledgers and counting out stacks of bills.

Pucket, for his part, sensed hostility in their gaze, suspicion, and another feeling that he could not read aright. The smell of tobacco smoke and rum hung heavily in the still, soggy air. For a few moments the only sound was the trickle of water from the eaves. Then one of the men stirred. "Well, come out of the rain, then. I'm Wheeler." He stepped to the open door and shouted along the dark passage, "Blanche!"

Presently a woman appeared and received Wheeler's orders to prepare a room and supper for the travelers. Meanwhile Pucket

and his companion had mounted the steps and now stood dripping and shaking the water from their limbs in the lee of the verandah roof.

The youngest of the local men, who wore a sheriff's star, shifted his position but made no move to rise. His flushed face and wavering gaze spoke of several hours' assiduous application to the bottle. "Bank examiner, you say? The nearest bank is at Carrick, the parish seat, thirty miles away across the bayous." He nodded his head vaguely over one shoulder.

"We're bound for Carrick," said Pucket. "We were told at Littlestone that the roads are impassable."

"Trouble at the bank in Carrick?" pursued the sheriff.

"Not yet," said Pucket. His face remained a sober mask but a gleam of mirth sprang up in his eyes. "They don't know I'm coming." He took off a shapeless felt hat and wrung half a pint of water out of it over the railing.

The apartment to which the woman led them was a dark, low-ceilinged, musty chamber opening off a covered passage between the inn and the general store, where a row of saddled horses were tied. Its only ventilation was one small window facing the stable yard. Although the heat here was stifling, she laid and lighted a fire to drive out the damp and dry their sodden clothes.

When the travelers reappeared on the verandah, after supping in their room on cold ham, corn cakes, and fruit, it was quite dark. The rain continued unabated. A smoking oil lamp, hanging from a nail over the table, showed the cardplayers still in their places. Pucket wasn't surprised to find a newcomer among them, for he had noticed an additional horse tethered in the passage.

No one stirred at Pucket and the half-breed's approach, but Wheeler, running his eye over their rumpled and still-damp clothing, asked if they fancied rum and cigars.

"No, thank you," said Pucket, pleasantly enough. "I don't touch spirits nor tobacco."

"Please yourself as to the spirits," said a sharp-featured man dressed all in black whose thin, fleshless nose lent his voice a reedy resonance. "But when the sun goes down hereabouts, a man wants a cigar to keep off the mosquitoes. They're as big as bobcats and as bold as kingfishers."

"What about your friend?" asked Wheeler, fingering the lid of a cigar box that rested on the table among the cards and glasses.

"Jack is mute," said Pucket, "and equally averse to strong drink and tobacco."

The men continued their endless game in almost total silence, seemingly oblivious of the two dour strangers who sat slapping mosquitoes in the shadows near the end of the verandah. At an interval in the game, one of the players, a broad, rough-hewn hulk of a man with a face like a fist and a tangled mane of sandy hair, arose and lurched indoors. Almost at once a woman's plaintive wail was heard from the dimly lit interior of the inn.

Wheeler sat forward in his chair and looked from one to another of his companions, letting his gaze rest longest on the sprawling, drunken figure of the sheriff, but no one else appeared to have heard. He was putting down his cards when the big man reappeared on the verandah with a full bottle of rum tucked under his arm.

Wheeler, apparently emboldened by the presence of strangers, came to his feet and caught at the man's shoulder. "You'll pay for that rum, Hamman," said he, "and all the other rum you've had here. And I've told you to stay away from my daughter when you're in liquor."

"And I've told you to keep your hands off me," snarled Hamman. Without letting go of the bottle, he spun round, shaking himself loose from Wheeler's grasp, and brought the heel of his open hand up abruptly under the innkeeper's chin, sending him reeling backward among the others.

"Here now," remonstrated the sheriff feebly. "Have no fighting here."

Hamman stood with his back to the railing and drew the cork out of the bottle with his teeth. "You keep out of it, Ralston," he muttered. "Wheeler's had all the money he's going to get from me. And Blanche is a free woman."

"Thou shalt not steal," said Pucket with peculiar earnestness, stepping nearer the light. "That's the law of God and man."

Hamman paused in the act of raising the bottle to his lips and regarded Pucket with scorn. "Billy Ralston's the law in Goshen, mister," he said.

"I reckon *I'm* the nearest thing to the law here that can stand on its own legs," rejoined Pucket in the same quiet, resolute tone. "Pay this man his due."

Hamman swallowed rum noisily. "I'll pay you to meddle in what doesn't concern you, you dish-faced milksop." He took one step in Pucket's direction, his eyes aflame with wrath and liquor. Then, to his utter astonishment, his progress was arrested as suddenly and completely as if he had walked into a wall. Pucket's companion Jack, who had somehow got behind him, held his arms to his sides

in a grip of steel. Hamman writhed and swore and threatened, but all to no purpose.

Then, as suddenly as he had seized Hamman, Jack let go, one hand deftly recovering the rum bottle while the other, balled into a murderous fist, swung in a high arc and came down on the top of his head with a thump like a wooden pestle. Hamman staggered under the blow, hurled imprecations indifferently at them all, and disappeared into the dark. They heard him splashing through puddles and mire and a minute later he rode off in the rain.

The others showed no inclination to resume their game. Wheeler sat by nursing his bruised jaw, while Sheriff Ralston huddled in his seat, making a sullen meal off the inside of his cheek. Though naturally close-mouthed before strangers, the cream of Goshen society thawed a little toward Pucket and Jack after their fearless defiance of Hamman. Despard, the lean black-clad man who had warned them against the mosquitoes, spoke first.

"Tom Hamman is a violent man," he observed, somewhat superfluously. "A treacherous friend and a worse enemy. You'd best not meet him again."

Pucket gathered that Despard and Hamman were both farmers who between them owned most of the land bordering the river. Despard grew rice in the swamps downstream and Hamman raised sugar cane and hogs in the scarcely less swampy terrain to the northeast. The man who had joined the party after Pucket and Jack's arrival was called "Doc" Palmer. Tall, fleshy, and pompous in manner, with a narrow stripe of black mustache, Palmer served the townfolk as veterinarian, doctor, dentist, and undertaker, and did a bit of blacksmithing at a tumbledown forge across the road from Wheeler's Inn.

When the travelers retired to their rest, the assemblage of idlers on the verandah had gone back to their cards. The moon shone high above the stable roof among shreds of whey-colored cloud, and the rain was settling down to a thin mist. By the time Jack awakened Pucket by putting his hand over the sleeper's mouth to stifle any sound he might make, the moon had set. The room was as dark as a mine, the window showing only as a vague, wan patch of luminescence. The smell of smoke came to Pucket's nostrils—not the pungent smoke of burning wood but the dark, heady incense of well-cured Havana.

He roused himself at once, sensing danger. First he sat up in his bed and felt under it for the black box, which still lay where he had put it, jammed under the slats that supported the mattress.

Then he found Jack's arm and grasped it urgently and interrogatively, his eyes and ears straining in the still darkness. For answer, Jack led him to the other side of the room and lifted him bodily in the air, setting him on his feet on a battered chest that stood under the high window so that Pucket could look down into the yard.

In the open passage outside the door he could just discern two seated figures by the light of a lamp that rested on the ground between them. They sat facing each other, their backs propped against two of the posts that supported the roof of the passage. Although motionless as the dead, each man held a cigar clenched in his teeth and from time to time emitted a coiling wisp of smoke. One of them was Despard and the other was Hamman.

By morning the rain had stopped. When Pucket and Jack emerged from their room in quest of nourishment, they found Wheeler's daughter Blanche sweeping away any traces that might have lingered from the night's vigil before their door. "There's fresh fish," said she. "My father caught two big walleyes off the landing this morning."

They took their breakfast on the verandah, deserted now except for Sheriff Ralston, who lay in a tousled heap, sleeping off his drunk. A fresh breeze stirred, laden with the scent of wet vegetation. The river was scarcely visible through the rolling fog. Somewhere a dog barked hungrily. Under a dirt-streaked sky that seemed to hang like a canopy just above the treetops, the town of Goshen wore a general air of forlorn decay. There was no sign of life in any of the houses along the road, and several of them had obviously been abandoned to the depredations of damp and wild animals. The largely roofless ruin of a stone church stood where one branch of the transverse road passed into the forest. The smithy was deserted, its forge cold.

Blanche came and went with somber efficiency, looking old beyond her years, worn out with more than bodily fatigue. Her short-cropped hair was the color of dried cornsilk, and the skin over her cheekbones was stretched as taut as rawhide.

"It strikes me, Miss Wheeler," said Pucket as she poured their coffee, "that this town of yours is remarkably deficient in one or two particulars. You've got no law, you've got no preacher, and I've not seen nor heard a child since I landed here."

"My name is McDonough, sir," she corrected him a little sharply. "There are no children in Goshen. All the children died of fever

two summers ago, my own two boys along with them, and my husband, too. And Pastor Choate. Half the town died, and the others moved away, saying the climate was poisonous. Which it is."

"I'm sorry," said Pucket. Jack put his hand over his heart and bowed his head nearly to his plate. "But have no new people moved in? Who works the farms hereabouts?"

"Nobody works the farms this time of year," said Wheeler, coming out of the inn and joining the travelers at the table. "Hamman and Despard hire gangs of workers from up north for the sowing and the harvesting—quarter them in bunkhouses like cattle. But during the rains the only people in Goshen are the ones who have nowhere else to go." He looked away at the lowering sky and, without looking back at Pucket and Jack, quoted, in a faintly speculative tone, "Evening red and morning gray send the traveler on his way."

When Pucket remained silent, he went on. "Blanche and I bailed out your boat this morning. It was half swamped with rain water. Not a government boat, is it?"

"Chartered it for a week at Littlestone yesterday."

"You'd have done better to have gone on down the Mississippi to Ledoux. Our little river won't take you more than halfway to Carrick and then you may lose a whole day waiting for horses."

"No occasion for haste," returned Pucket, "the day after tomorrow being Sunday, and the bank closed." He had a habit, before he spoke, of compressing his lips momentarily, as if something inside him opposed his decision to express what was in his mind. "Speaking of horses, it seems strange to me that your guests of last night have all left their horses saddled in the passage."

Wheeler rubbed his face and looked away quickly. "Yes, well, they stayed over on account of the rain, and in slack time I don't keep a stable boy—"

"All stayed the night, did they?" Pucket inquired, in a tone between surprise and disbelief.

"It often happens this time of year, what with the rain, and one or two being overfond of liquor. There's a loft above the passage, and most nights half a dozen men doss down there."

"Have they no wives or families?"

"We all had wives and families once, Mr. Pucket. As my daughter told you, we had a dreadful visitation of the fever here, two summers ago. I'd best see to the horses."

At high noon the sun came out, raising steam from the sodden

ground. Pucket and Jack strolled along the high road, deep in a conference to which Jack's contribution consisted only of an occasional nod. Together they pulled their boat out of the water and left it inverted on the weed-grown bank above the landing.

By two o'clock it was raining again, and the cardplayers, Hamman among them, were back at their game. Rum did not figure in the proceedings today, as if the populace of Goshen had by common consent abandoned their tippling in deference to the wayfarers who lingered unaccountably in their midst. Their continued presence seemed to be a particular source of bewilderment and consternation to Sheriff Ralston. Spruce and shaven but restless without his glass, he paid little heed to his cards but seldom took his eyes off Pucket and Jack, who sat silent in the corner of the verandah, somberly contemplating the cascading wall of water before them.

The travelers supped in their room. Afternoon dragged on into evening and so into night, with always the steady dashing of rain on roofs and pavements, the pervasive scent of wet earth and vegetation, the almost palpable dampness. That night, after blowing out their candle, Pucket and Jack took off their boots and sat quietly in the dark, waiting. As on the previous night, the rain gradually thinned to mist and the clouds broke up into filaments of wrack, wreathing the setting moon.

Furtive footsteps announced the arrival of the night's watchers. No one spoke on either side of the door, but the men within mounted side by side on the chest to peer cautiously around the frame of the window. At first they saw only Wheeler squatting on his haunches in the passage, sucking at an unlighted cigar. There was no lamp tonight, but as their eyes traced out the outlines of the stable yard and probed the gloom, they became aware that another man was sitting on a box or bench of some description in the very middle of the muddy yard. The fitful light of the moon eventually revealed Sheriff Ralston, engaged in a solitary orgy of drinking. The night passed without incident, and when the travelers awoke in the morning the yard was empty.

It wasn't until their third day in Goshen that Pucket and Jack found the grave. Their morning ramble had taken them off the road to a spot of high, rocky ground behind the inn. The earth here showed unmistakable signs of recent disturbance not quite effaced by the rain. Several large blocks of stone, probably the remains of a building long since ruined, had been piled into a sort of rude cairn.

Pucket walked twice around the structure, examining it intently from every angle in the glare of the mounting sun. Jack chose a more direct method and began to disarrange the stones.

"Get away from there!" Sheriff Ralston, armed with a shotgun, appeared from around the corner of the inn, his face dark with anger. "Leave those rocks alone and come down."

He gestured menacingly with his gun, and Pucket and Jack came down. Hamman and Wheeler emerged from a door at the back of the stables and stood silently flanking Ralston.

"What's your business here?" demanded the sheriff. "What cause do you have to bide here in idleness and pry into what doesn't concern you?"

"We have no business here, as you know," said Pucket, not in the least cowed by the muzzle of Ralston's shotgun or the massed strength of the citizenry. "I am a Federal Reserve auditor bound for Carrick on government business and Jack is my friend, companion, and body servant. Early tomorrow we go on to Carrick, weather permitting. As for idleness, it hasn't yet driven us to cards and liquor."

The sheriff scowled at them in brooding silence.

"What do you mean by meddling with those rocks on the hill?" demanded Hamman. His drunken fury of two nights before had turned into a cold, vindictive hostility, and he drew courage from the sheriff's shotgun. "You're mighty bold for a couple of strangers in town, government business or no. Or did you think that heap of rocks was a bank?"

"Looks more like a grave to me," observed Pucket imperturbably.

Farmer Despard, lean as a stick and still dressed in mourning, came out of the inn followed by "Doc" Palmer. "It is a grave," said Palmer, "and a fresh one." The others made as if to silence him, but he overruled them with a single glance of his dark, deep-set eyes. "You may not be entitled by your government post to probe into local secrets, but we don't want you to go away from Goshen with mistaken notions in your head about us, or resentment for our lack of hospitality. Come into the shade and hear what there is to hear."

The party moved to the verandah, stepping single file along a row of stones standing like islands in a sea of liquid mud. Chairs were drawn up in a circle as if for a formal proceeding, and the sheriff's shotgun disappeared. "Doc" Palmer acted as spokesman. He adopted his most solemn manner, speaking scarcely above a

whisper, as if he feared to wake a sleeping child, although there were no children in Goshen.

"Six days ago, two men arrived here in a boat, just as the two of you did night before last. Only these other men were dying of fever. They were parched and yellow and one was raving out of his head. They both died the same night. I needn't tell you what terrors the fever raises in this town. Every man you see here has lost his wife to it, and most their children as well. We buried those two unfortunate travelers as soon as it was light enough to dig. We never troubled about coffins, but shoveled in enough quicklime on top of them to scour the sewers of hell."

"What became of their boat?" asked Pucket.

"Burned in the forge."

"And their papers and personal belongings?"

"We looked for no papers. We buried them as they died—dragged them up the hill with ropes and threw the ropes in with them. They had no belongings but the clothes on their backs."

"A cruel ending," mused Pucket. "They must have families and friends looking even now for their return."

"Let them look, and hope," said Despard. "Hope is a better companion than grief in the dark of the night."

"Some believe we did wrong," resumed Palmer, studying his fingernails so as to avoid looking elsewhere. "One even suggested that these men were—not quite dead when we buried them. That's nonsense, of course."

"They were dead enough," asserted Wheeler. "No mortal power could have helped them, and the sooner they were in the ground, the better. All the same, it gives a man the shivers to think of them lying there on the hill in a pit full of lime, with the spark of life still in their bodies."

"Stow that talk," hissed Palmer. "I am the sworn justice of this place, and I say that no man was buried alive on that hill."

The discussion lapsed into a half-hearted exchange of recriminations, most of which had evidently been expressed so often during the preceding week that they had degenerated into mere formulas without much meaning. When the rain came, a sufficient degree of goodwill had been restored that the daily card game began as a matter of course.

After supper Pucket engaged the company in a long and bootless discussion about crops. Meanwhile, Jack braved the driving rain to purloin a pick and shovel and a full lamp from the shed adjoining

the inn and stash them in the bushes near the grave, taking shelter there himself beneath a couple of old blankets.

Pucket retired to rest early, saying that he needed a good night's sleep before resuming his travels on the morrow. But he remained in the room off the stable yard only long enough to light a two inch stump of candle, and then, securing the door, he slipped off through the rain to join Jack.

They worked by moonlight, knocking down the upper blocks of stone with a log ram and shifting the rest by brute force. Then, heedless of the rain that still fell in sheets about them, they attacked the fresh grave with pick and shovel. Jack plied the pick with the energy of a demon, while Pucket scooped out the loosened earth and hurled it down the slope. The soil came up in heavy slabs of miry clay that clung to the tools like pitch. After a time they found it necessary to light the lamp and protect it from the elements in a makeshift grotto of stone blocks.

The work went slowly, but the rain slackened when they were nearing their goal. As they cleared the last of the loose soil from the pit, their shovels struck against something hard and irregular. Pucket lowered the lamp into the pit while Jack disinterred six heavy canvas bags, each bearing the legend FIRST NATIONAL BANK. LEDOUX, LOUISIANA. They were hauling the bags out of the pit when they found themselves surrounded, without warning, by the outraged citizens of Goshen. This time there was no shouting, and this time they all had shotguns.

Pucket spoke first. "One or two details of your story didn't fit," said he, in the collected and uncompromising tone of voice they had grown accustomed to. "And I can smell gold the way a wolf can smell a lamb."

The wind drove the nearly-spent rain now one way and now another, sending rivers of mud down his arms and legs. "Do you call yourselves men? Do you call yourselves citizens? You're a brood of jackals, with a sheriff who soaks up rum like a sponge instead of enforcing the law, and a justice of the peace who abets the townsfolk in a conspiracy to conceal stolen gold, and tells tall tales to gull strangers."

"The story I told you was true in the main," came Palmer's voice from the dark. "There are two men in that grave, under a layer of boards. Only it was gold that we poured on them, not lime. And they didn't die of fever, but bullets."

"And now you propose to put two more men into the grave."

"We didn't kill them," said Sheriff Ralston, whose pride had been

touched on the raw by Pucket's speech. "They came here in a dying condition, as Doc said. They must have been shot robbing the bank at Ledoux. You know that. You followed them here."

"We followed nobody here," replied Pucket. "It's true we heard about the robbery at Ledoux as we came down the river, but it was none of our business."

Despard was the first to lower his gun. "But now you've made it your business," he said, "and I thank God for that."

"Take it!" screamed Ralston. "Take that cursed gold out of this town. We'll have no peace here until it's gone."

Pucket scowled at him in contempt. "Get a grip on yourself, man. I can't take that gold where I'm going. I tell you, it's none of my affair. You're the law here."

"Let's get in out of this weather," said Palmer. "Bring the gold inside and we can argue about it there."

Some minutes later they assembled in the back parlor of the inn. A Bible, Swan's *Treatise for Justices*, and a thick leather-bound manuscript book ranged on the mantelpiece showed that this was "Doc" Palmer's customary courtroom. The men sat around sipping coffee, not rum. Pucket and Jack wore borrowed clothes that fitted badly but were at least dry. On the stone hearth stood the six muddy canvas bags, their mouths untied to reveal their burdens of gold coin.

"When those men landed here a week ago, half dead," said Palmer, "we *did* think at first that they had the fever. One was raving and the other was beyond speech. Then we saw they'd been shot. We did what we could for them, but they'd lost too much blood to live. When we found those bags in the bottom of their boat it seemed like a miracle. There's more gold in one of those bags than any of us has ever seen, let alone hoped to possess. The temptation was just too great. We buried those men, and their gold with them, and burned their boat. Then we all swore—Blanche, too—not to dig up that gold for a year.

"It wasn't more than a day or so before each of us began to suspect the others of hatching some treachery behind his back. We took to staying together at night so that each could watch the others. When you came, we thought you'd been sent to find that gold. We'd sworn not to talk but each one feared that one of the others would come to you privately and tell where the gold was, so as to collect a reward and clear his conscience. We watched you day and night in pairs, but that wasn't much good, because two could break their oath as well as one.

"If you hadn't dug up this gold I believe we would have come to bloodshed before long. And if you don't take it out of this town tomorrow, I'll dump it in the river, or die trying."

Pucket meditated. "I have no authority to take possession of this gold. I'd have to change my plans and carry it back down to Littlestone in our boat, without an armed escort."

"You could hide the gold in the bottom of the boat easily enough," said Despard. "It's good ballast. And that mongrel mute of yours is as safe an escort as a squad of infantry."

While Hamman, Despard, Wheeler, and Blanche McDonough counted the gold, Pucket helped Ralston and Palmer draft an official report of the arrival of the dying bank robbers in Goshen, which he was to take along with the gold to Ledoux. The conspirators watched the stacks of gleaming coins disappear again into the bags with mingled chagrin and relief.

No one thought of sleeping. The dawn was still a highly dubious proposition when the travelers changed back into their own clothes and paid their reckoning. The others assembled on the landing to see them off. The heavy bags were arranged with care in the bottom of the boat and covered with blankets. Jack pulled into the middle of the stream with long, even strokes, while Pucket sat on his black box in the stern, casting sidelong glances into the fog rolling along both banks as if he expected to be ambushed at any moment.

"With that current they'll be in Ledoux in three hours," said Wheeler.

"Less," said Palmer.

It was a long day in Goshen. A pall of apathy settled over the inhabitants of the rainbound town like nothing they had known before. With blank minds and languid limbs they filled in the grave of the two bank robbers again. A quiet, sober game of cards broke up before the rain stopped. No one but Wheeler and his daughter slept under the inn roof that night.

The next day promised to drag out its dreary length in much the same way, but in the middle of the afternoon the townsfolk were astonished to hear a whistle from the river. Looking up from their cards, they saw emerging from the mists a steam launch such as seldom ventured so far upstream among the mangrove roots. A federal marshal and a detachment of soldiers disembarked in good order and then bolted for cover from the starting rain.

Sheriff Ralston and Doc Palmer, without leaving the protection of the verandah roof, stood up to receive them. The marshal was an old soldier, stiff as a pike, with dauntingly austere features.

"There's been a bank robbery at Ledoux," he announced. "The Cat Island Gang. They got away with more than a hundred thousand in gold and notes. Have any strangers been in these parts the past few days?"

Something in his manner warned Palmer and the sheriff against making any revelations until they had heard more.

"After the robbery, the gang split up," the marshal continued, scowling fiercely. "Two men escaped by boat with the gold. Two others made their way overland with a chest of notes. We caught them yesterday, camped out about ten miles down the river from here—'Preacher' Pucket and 'Dumb Jack' Condorcet."

A cold, sick feeling took possession of the sheriff, accompanied by a wild craving for a dose of rum. "This Pucket—and the other—you say they're members—"

"Of the Cat Island Gang. Slippery as snakes, both of them, but we've got them in leg irons now in the jail at Ledoux, and their traveling days are over. It's the other two we're looking for—Price and Shipman. They got clean away with the gold in a boat they'd tied up under the wharf behind the bank. The guards shot at them—swear they hit them both, but they slipped away in the fog and there's been no trace of them since."

If the marshal noticed the successive ripples of attention, fascination, reflection, and calculation set off by his words in the idlers assembled on the verandah, he misread their cause. Despard was the first to take his leave and ride off, and Hamman followed soon after. Presently Doc Palmer remembered unfinished business elsewhere. The sheriff excused himself on the grounds of pressing official duties.

Each of the four hastily gathered together a few provisions and loaded them, along with tools for digging, on his horse. Each went his separate route, having had enough of sworn pacts and shared secrets. Each breathed a silent farewell to Goshen as he rode away through the drizzle, vowing never to return.

The marshal, finding Wheeler's rum to his taste and feeling no urge to chase after bandits in the rain, protracted his stay until late in the afternoon. His troops invaded the inn without loss of life or limb and kept Blanche running for hours, cooking and dispensing cider and cigars. The crew of the launch came ashore in shifts to sup and sip and loaf. Wheeler had never done a better day's business in his life, but he would cheerfully have given up the profits if he could have been rid of the soldiers. When they finally steamed away down the river, it was nearly dark.

He found Blanche in the stable, dressed for riding and saddling her piebald mare.

"It's too late to start now," he said, with finality. "We'll leave early in the morning, and we won't ride."

Blanche left off her work and stared at him from out of the shadows in puzzlement.

"We'll go down the river," he explained. "Those two devils never buried that gold. The marshal said nothing about them having a boat. They've scuttled it, Blanche, with the gold in it, and I mean to find it. They'll have left some marker, you'll see—maybe not much of one, but it'll be plain enough to a man who knows it's there somewhere. While those other fools are losing their way in the bayous—"

"The only boat in town is the green canoe."

"Then the green canoe will have to do for us."

"How are you going to raise the gold if you do find the marker?"

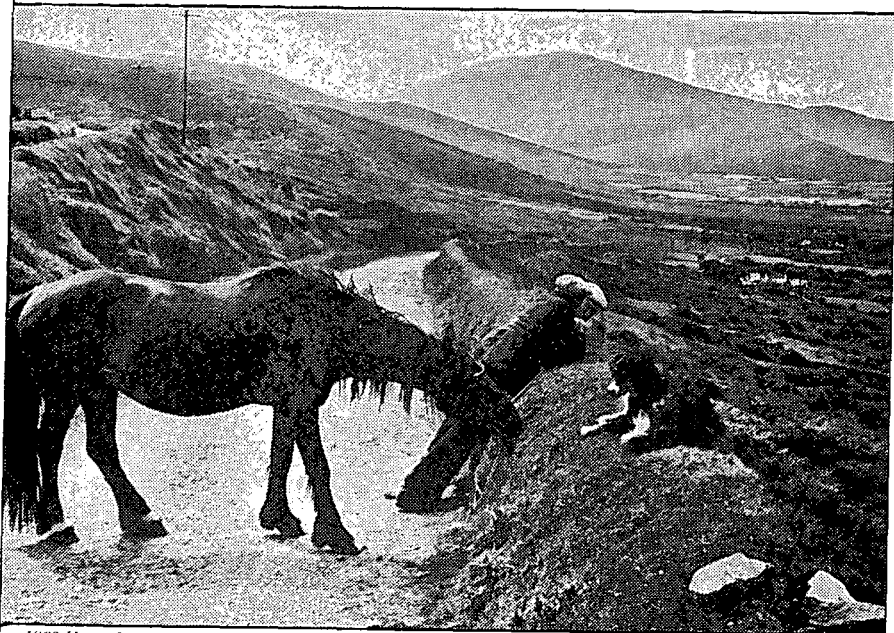
"Ropes. Buckets. We're both strong swimmers. We'll load our tackle in the canoe tonight and leave at first light."

With a curt nod of assent she slipped the saddle off the mare. For an hour they were busy making preparations, and when they retired to rest the canoe was tied up at the landing, its cargo of gear and provisions protected against the rain by a tarpaulin.

The birds were just waking up in dark and dripping thickets when Wheeler turned out of his bed next morning. Half dressed and half asleep, he stalked from back parlor to kitchen to stable, searching and calling for Blanche in mounting alarm.

But Blanche had started down the river alone half an hour earlier, taking the only boat in town.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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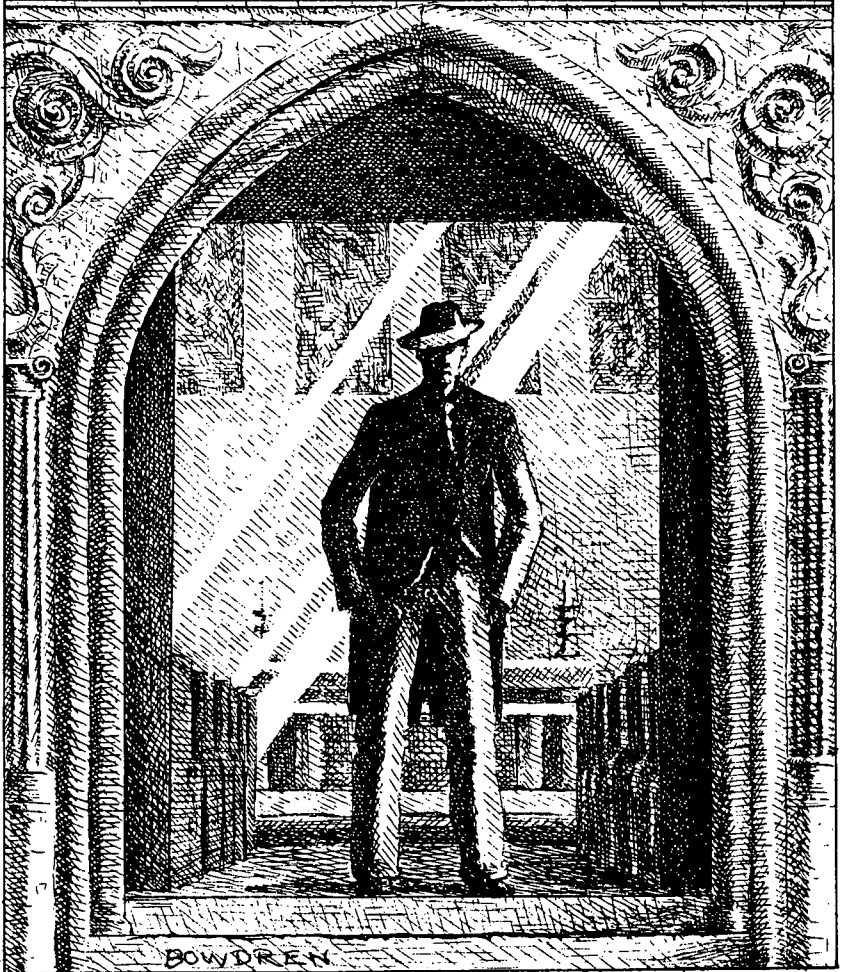
Shooting the breeze. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

The Dutiful Son

by Ralph McInerny



BOWDREN

Illustration by John Bowdren

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When Roger Dowling came out of the church after saying the noon Mass, he stopped to inhale the odor of lilacs that filled the air. The sun on his face, that wonderful smell, and the prospect of the lunch Mrs. Murkin would have ready for him added an animal content to his spiritual peace.

"Father Dowling?"

He opened his eyes and in the sunlight had only the impression of a person, a silhouette. He stepped back out of the sunlight.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Father. Could I talk with you?"

It was tempting to tell the man to come back in an hour. He did not like the prospect of being cheated of a peaceful lunch. But that was temptation.

"Have you eaten lunch?"

"I attended your Mass."

"Come along. We can talk while we eat."

His name was Francis Stendall, he had come from Oakland, California, specifically to talk with Father Dowling about a most important matter. A matter, as it turned out, not wholly apt as a luncheon topic.

"I had no idea I was known in Oakland."

Stendall did not smile. Perhaps he thought Roger Dowling was serious. It seemed best not to assume a sense of humor in

this short, stocky, bald-headed man.

"I came to see whoever was the pastor of St. Hilary's."

Marie Murkin, reconciled to this stranger's consuming half the lunch she had prepared for the pastor, began to apportion it between them.

"My parents lived in this parish many years ago."

"Stendall?" Marie said, giving it some thought. The guest looked surprised that the housekeeper should enter into the conversation.

"How long ago was that?"

Roger Dowling asked.

"It was during the Depression. Nineteen thirty-one, perhaps 1932."

"That was before your time, wasn't it, Marie?"

She glared at him and huffed off to the kitchen with a serving bowl.

"I have the address. Before coming to you, I found the house."

"I see."

"I want an exhumation."

"An exhumation?" This seemed an abrupt change of subject. Father Dowling had thought they were talking of the house in which Stendall's parents had lived.

It turned out that the two topics were one. Francis had the story from his mother, who told it to him in great detail during her final days. "She died of can-

cer two months ago. She exacted a promise from me and I am here to keep it." Francis Stendall had the look of a man who did not make promises easily but kept the ones he made. Roger Dowling was forming the somewhat grotesque idea that Stendall's mother had made her son promise to exhume her body, ship it from California, and bury it in the yard of the house in which they had lived all those years ago. Not wholly off the mark, as it turned out.

"My mother gave birth to a baby while they lived in that house. The baby died almost immediately. The doctor, who was a Catholic, baptized the baby and helped my father bury the body in the back yard." He waited for a shocked reaction from Roger Dowling and when he did not get one went on. "I, of course, was shocked by this. My first thought was that it was illegal. But that was the least of my mother's concerns. Everyone was poor then, as she told it, and burial expenses for a dead infant would have been a luxury. They buried the baby in the yard to save money."

"Is that what bothered your mother?"

"Oh no. Not at all. It was the thought of her child lying in unconsecrated ground, perhaps liable to be dug up accidentally. It weighed on her mind that new construction would have

taken place, that perhaps a high-rise building had been put up over that gravesite. What would then have happened to the remains? She could not be at peace until she knew her child would be exhumed and reburied in consecrated ground. I assured her it would be done."

"Well."

"I have come to you for two reasons. I would like you to be there when the digging is done. And you will know how to go about doing this."

"Well, I know who to call, anyway."

He called Phil Keegan, captain of detectives on the Fox River police force, an old friend, and after a number of other calls, suggested by Phil, got in touch with McDivitt the undertaker as well. All problems but one were swiftly solved.

"Have you talked with the present owner?" Father Dowling asked.

"My hope is that it will be a parishioner of yours."

Roger Dowling had the feeling that he was the one keeping Stendall's promise to his mother. Well, why not?

"What is the address?"

"It's a house on Macon. Thirty-three-oh-six."

While Roger Dowling tried to visualize the neighborhood a voice was heard from the kitchen.

"Whelans," Marie Murkin

said. "The Whelans live there. Have for years. I don't envy you asking Jennings Whelan if you can drop by and dig a hole in his yard."

Francis Stendall cocked an ear as Marie spoke, then said to Roger Dowling. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear all that. My hearing is going, just as my father's did."

"Mrs. Murkin thinks I had better contact the present owner right away."

"Is he a parishioner?"

Fortunately Stendall did not hear the laugh from the kitchen.

Jennings Whelan had been on the books of the parish for years, but two years ago he'd informed Roger Dowling that he no longer recognized in the Catholic church the faith of his fathers.

"Mr. Whelan, I assure you that nothing that takes place at St. Hilary's . . ."

"St. Hilary's has nothing to do with it. It's been my parish, yes. But as part of a diocese, part of a global church. I used to know where the Church stood. Now every paper I read seems to have some crazy nun or priest denying the creed. I give up."

It had been the start of a long and eventually unsuccessful argument. Roger Dowling had been unable to convince Whelan that whatever he might hear in the news there was more clarity about Catholic

teaching now than there had ever been. Every time he had made headway, some other outrage would make Whelan's anger return, more virulent each time.

"This isn't personal, Father Dowling, I have nothing against you."

"Come to Mass, Jennings. Say your prayers. Don't let things upset you so."

"I'll say my prayers. Don't worry about that. But I'll support the Church again when it gets its act together."

What would Jennings Whelan make of the request Father Dowling must convey to him on Stendall's behalf?

"I'll come with you," Stendall said.

"I think I'd better go alone."

"Whatever you say." He seemed relieved. "I am staying at the Holiday Inn just outside Elgin. I'll call you tonight."

He had rented a car and went away in it. Marie Murkin cleaned up with a little smile on her face.

"You should have taken him with you."

He decided not to give her a chance to repeat her condemnation of Jennings Whelan. The man's decision to stop coming to Mass had prompted a good old fashioned anathema from the housekeeper.

"What if everyone did that?" she wanted to know.

"I couldn't afford to keep you on."

"Hmph. No Jennings Whelan is driving me out of here."

Now he said how admirable it was of Francis Stendall to fulfill his mother's dying wish.

"I don't wonder it bothered her. Burying a baby in the back yard. What did Captain Keegan think of that?"

"You mean rather than the front yard?"

"You know what I mean."

"They won't prosecute."

Suddenly there was a glint in her eye. "Maybe they can prosecute Jennings Whelan."

Roger Dowling decided to stop by Whelan's without telephoning first.

This did not seem like a good idea when he stood at the Whelan door, pressing the doorbell for the fourth time.

Still no answer. Roger Dowling walked around the house and there was Whelan in a lawn chair. He wore swimming trunks and a sunhat, but his large body, white as the belly of a beached fish, was exposed to the sun.

"Mr. Whelan?"

He came sputtering awake, looked up and tried to get to his feet. He lost his balance and began to trip across the lawn until Roger Dowling caught his arm and steadied him. His hat askew on his head, Whe-

lan regarded the priest.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Father Dowling."

"I am truly sorry. I rang the bell several times and then took the chance of coming round to the back yard."

"I was catching some of this sun."

Roger Dowling looked out over the quarter acre of grass that made up a yard surrounded by a high hedge that provided Whelan with privacy for his sunbathing. The edges of the lawn were lined with flower beds and there was another bed set halfway to the back, a circular plot alive with spring blossoms.

"I see you are quite a gardener."

"I am not. That is Imelda."

Mrs. Whelan. "She does a splendid job." Imelda Whelan slipped away to Mass without her husband's knowing it.

"She wouldn't have heard the bell," Whelan explained. "She is taking a nap. As I was."

"You must forgive me."

"I hope you don't think you can change my mind about you know what."

"I never lose that hope. But that is not why I'm here."

"I watched a talk show last night, local, some woman on it claimed she was a nun. She looked like a weight-lifter. All about how terrible her life was, everyone telling her what to do

just because she took the vow of obedience."

"A man whose parents once lived in this house came to see me today."

Whelan looked confused.

"His parents lived here in the early thirties."

"I bought it in '42," Whelan said.

"He has a most unusual request to make."

Whelan smiled indulgently. "Not unusual at all. I know just how he feels. Drove into south Chicago a few years ago and stopped at the house where I grew up. Asked if I could take a look at the inside again. Nostalgia. They let me. A colored family."

"This is more than nostalgia. In fact it isn't nostalgia at all. I don't think this man ever lived here."

"Who is he?"

"He lives in California. His mother died recently and he promised to exhume the body of an infant and have it reburied in consecrated ground."

Whelan looked at Father Dowling as he must have looked at talk shows. "I don't follow you."

"His mother had a baby in this house. It died almost immediately."

"Yes."

"They buried the baby in the yard."

"In the yard? Good God!"

"The idea is to rebury the child."

"You want to dig up the yard?"

"I'm afraid that's the idea."

"You say they buried a baby here." Whelan looked out over the carefully kept lawn, at the flower beds that ringed it. He had the air of a man whose home has just become an unfamiliar place. "You'll have to talk to Imelda about that, Father."

Imelda had even more difficulty grasping the nature of the request than her husband had. Jennings had put on clothes and sat listening to Father Dowling explain it to Imelda. This might have been one more proof that the world was coming unglued.

"Dig up the yard? But where will they dig?"

"His mother gave him very explicit instructions which he will pass on to McDivitt."

"McDivitt?"

"The undertaker."

He kept at it, not losing his patience. After all, this was not an ordinary request. Imelda Whelan did not like the thought of her yard being dug up, but that was not the worst of it.

"You mean all these years there has been a body buried out there?"

"We've been living in a cemetery," Jennings said with morbid satisfaction. He was not a lot of help.

Eventually Imelda and then Jennings Whelan gave their permission. He had assured them that the legal aspects had been looked into and that McDivitt knew his business. Neither Whelan looked happy to be reminded of McDivitt's trade; they were all too likely to provide business for him in the near future. But perhaps what swung it was that they wanted any corpses in the back yard removed. Jennings said he didn't think he could sunbathe out there until the matter had been taken care of.

It was a somewhat weary but satisfied Roger Dowling who returned to his rectory. He said his office, read a few cantos of the *Purgatorio*—Dante was one of his two favorite authors, St. Thomas Aquinas being the other—smoked a pipe, drank coffee, and was well disposed when Phil Keegan called to suggest they watch the Cubs that night. He meant at the rectory, of course, and he was inviting himself for dinner as well. There was never an objection from Marie when Phil Keegan joined him at table.

"Good," Marie said. "I want to ask him about this business of burying people in your back yard."

"I wouldn't advise it, Marie. This was during the Depression, and unusual things were permitted then."

"They asked permission?"

"Oh, I doubt that."

It was a sad scene, a man whose infant had not survived out in his back yard with the doctor, consigning it to the ground. How that must have haunted the parents over the years.

Francis Stendall called while Phil was there and Roger Dowling told him that everything was set for the following day.

"So soon?"

"There's no point in delay."

"I hadn't expected it would be tomorrow. Father, I'm not sure I can be there."

"Well, that isn't necessary, of course. The reburial won't be tomorrow in any case. There are legal delays."

"Could I call you at this time tomorrow?"

"Of course."

He and Phil talked a bit about the strange case, but the conversation wandered, both because the Cubs made an unexpected rally in the late innings and because Phil was inclined to want to pursue Jennings Whelan's grievances.

"He's right, Roger. Look at the church now and when we were kids."

"Look at us."

"The church is supposed to stay the same."

"It is supposed to last until the end of time. That's not the same as not changing."

He was glad to get off the subject when the fortunes of the game changed and the Cubs snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

After Phil had gone, he sat up in the study, having a final pipeful, thinking again of that long ago scene, a father and the doctor, digging a grave in the back yard of a home in Fox River to bury a newborn infant who had not survived. Despite the mother's fear, the infant had lain undiscovered all these years. Maybe it would have been best to let well enough alone.

McDivitt, with the instructions he had been given by Stendall, made short work of it. Unfortunately, the digging had to be done where it disturbed the round flower bed in the middle of the lawn, and Imelda had to be persuaded again.

"Thank God you're here, Father," McDivitt whispered. Pink complexion, hair like cotton, McDivitt did not look like a man who had made a living burying the dead.

The body was found ten minutes later. But it was the body of an adult, not of a child. Also found was a valise containing stocks and bonds. McDivitt stopped the operation at once.

"The police must be called," he announced. He obviously

thought he had been deceived and he did not like it. But his surprise was as nothing compared with Father Dowling's.

"I'll call them," he said.

The Whelans were in the house, preferring not to witness what was happening in their back yard.

"Are they done?"

"The police are going to have to be called."

"Doesn't McDivitt have a license?"

"The body that has been found is that of an adult, not a child."

Imelda Whelan had not understood and her husband repeated it to her. Her mouth fell open as if she were going to cry out, but no sound came.

"Some money has been found, too," Roger Dowling said as he dialed Phil Keegan's number.

"I'd better go out there," Jennings Whelan said.

Phil arrived and he brought Cy Horvath and Agnes Lamb with him, as well as a mobile lab unit. The Whelans looked more and more like guests in their own home.

"Get hold of this guy Stendall," Phil told Horvath.

"He's staying at the Holiday Inn in Elgin," Roger Dowling said. "I'll call him."

"Wait," Phil said, "I want to think a minute." But in less than a minute, he said, "Call him but don't tell him what happened."

"Are they going to keep digging until they find the baby?" Jennings Whelan asked.

"If there is a baby," Keegan growled.

There was no Francis Stendall registered at the Holiday Inn in Elgin. Nor had there been in recent days. It was a confused Roger Dowling who put down the phone and thought about his conversations with Francis Stendall.

"I checked the plat book," Whelan said. "If they lived here, they were renters. No Stengels ever owned this house."

"Stendalls."

"No one with a name anything like that."

Roger Dowling went out into the back yard where the mobile lab unit had put the body on a large rubbery sheet and were peeling back the burlap in which it was rolled. It was like seeing a mummy unwrapped.

The crew, after some preliminary examination, put the corpse in a body bag and sent it downtown. The valise went into another car. Two experts remained to examine the burial site.

"I feel like a fool," Roger Dowling said to Phil Keegan.

"He must have made up the story just to get that body dug up."

"And the stocks?"

"I'll bet he didn't know about that."

"Whoever he is."

"Don't worry, Roger. We'll find him."

Roger Dowling walked back to the rectory, wishing he could share Phil's confidence. From half a block away he saw the car parked in front of the house. His step quickened. He was certain that was the car Francis Stendall had been driving the day before.

Caution overcame him as he neared the house, and he cut through the playground of the school so he could approach the rectory from the church. This brought him to the kitchen door.

He went up the three steps to the back porch, then stopped, frozen in place. Voices. From the kitchen. Marie Murkin's and Francis Stendall's.

The voices went back and forth, antiphon and response, seemingly just an ordinary conversation, a passing back and forth of words to make the time go. After what had happened in the Whelans' back yard, Father Dowling felt no compunction at all about eavesdropping. Marie seemed to be reassuring the man.

"It's perfectly understandable," she said.

"No, it is cowardly. It's not as if it were a brother I had known."

"Were you born in Fox River?"

"No. My parents moved west before I was born."

Roger Dowling tried to detect

duplicity in the man's voice and he could not. What a consummate actor he was. The priest backed silently off the porch to make another, audible approach to the door, and nearly bumped into an old man. Erickson. If Erickson had not put out a hand to stop him, Roger Dowling would have toppled the ancient parishioner.

"Mr. Erickson, I'm sorry."

The old man looked warily at the pastor. Erickson had reached an age where everyone treated him like a child, an idiot child. Confused by the way Roger Dowling had come off the porch, he seemed on the verge of thinking that his mind really had gone.

"Oh, it's you," Marie said from the doorway. She meant Roger Dowling. "Hello, Mr. Erickson." Her voice changed as she addressed the old man.

"Thanks," Roger Dowling said to Erickson, in a normal voice. "I might have fallen."

"When I was a kid we used to do that, walk backward." Erickson's face, though lined, had a peaches and cream look about it; little wisps of white hair stood up on his head. He looked newborn.

"How did everything go?" Stendall said, coming out on the porch.

He seemed the same as he had the day before. There was no apprehension in his voice or

manner, no indication that he knew what had been dug up in that yard.

"Not quite as expected."

"How do you mean?"

"Let's go inside." He turned. "Goodbye, Mr. Erickson. Thanks again. Are you going back to the school?"

A little delay and then Erickson nodded. Roger Dowling waited until he started back to the school, which had been turned into a center for senior parishioners.

"How about lemon meringue pie?" Marie said brightly. There were two plates on the kitchen table. When in doubt, serve food was Marie's motto.

"We better talk in the study," Roger Dowling said to Stendall, avoiding Marie's look of disappointment. Clearly she wanted all the gory details.

Roger Dowling shut the door of the study after Stendall was seated and then went around the desk and got settled.

"I tried to call you from the Whelans' house."

"I was probably already here."

"The Holiday Inn in Elgin said you weren't staying there."

"Did I say Holiday Inn? I'm at the Howard Johnson's."

Roger Dowling opened the telephone directory to the yellow pages, found the number and dialed it. Stendall looked puzzled. A voice said, "Howard Johnson's."

"Mr. Stendall's room, please."

"One moment."

Roger Dowling listened to the phone ring, looking across his desk at Francis Stendall.

"Why are you doing that?" Francis Stendall said, genuinely puzzled. Roger Dowling put down the phone.

"It was not an infant who was buried in that yard. It was an adult."

Francis Stendall watched him as if waiting for a clue that the priest did not mean what he was saying. "An adult?"

"The body was wrapped in burlap sacks. A man, apparently. The remains were taken away."

"My God." Francis Stendall sat back in his chair as if he had been pushed.

"Is there anything you want to change in what you have told me thus far, Mr. Stendall?"

But Stendall was staring at a bookshelf, not seeing it.

"Did your parents own that house?"

He looked at Roger Dowling, there and not there. "No. No, they rented. They were poor."

"Do you have any idea who that man is?"

"No. Of course not."

"Your mother gave you instructions about where to dig."

"Yes, yes."

"Then she must have known what was buried there."

"She told me it was a child,

her child." He looked at Roger Dowling. "Was she lying?"

That was not a question about which Roger Dowling could be of any help to the man. He lit his pipe while his visitor was clearly reviewing those moving scenes he had described the day before, his mother's deathbed, the anguished tale of the infant, extracting the promise that he would have her child exhumed and buried in consecrated ground.

"Was your mother prepared to die?"

"She knew for months it was inevitable. I used to think that would be an advantage. Now I don't know."

"In what way an advantage?"

He looked at the priest as if he should not have to explain.

"You could prepare."

"Did your mother see a priest?"

He nodded slowly, as if not quite trusting his memory.

"Before or after she told you this story?"

"Both. She saw him frequently. Father, I still can't believe that she lied."

"What we know is that where she told you an infant was buried the body of an adult was found." He still did not want to mention the valise.

"I wonder whose body it is?" Francis Stendall said.

"I should tell you that when the body was found, the police

asked me to contact you. I called the Holiday Inn and you were not there. They—I—assumed your story about the infant was merely a device to have the adult body found.”

“But I didn’t know!”

Roger Dowling believed him now. “They will want to talk with you, I’m afraid.”

“Of course.” He rubbed his forehead as if it ached.

“There’s something else.”

“What?” He seemed ready for a further blow.

“A valise was found with the body. It contained stocks and bonds.”

He actually sighed. “My parents were poor.”

He almost cheered up. Whatever dark speculation had been going through his mind was eradicated by the news of the stock certificates. He pushed back his chair. “I’ll go see the police now.”

“Why don’t we have them come here? Captain Keegan often comes to my Mass at noon. We can all have lunch together.”

“I’ll go to Mass, too.”

The body was of a male adult of perhaps thirty years of age. It had been lying in the yard for nearly half a century. It was going to be very difficult to make an identification.

“It’s more a research problem

than anything,” Phil said, tying into Marie’s lasagna. “Checking old newspapers.”

“How did the man die?” Francis Stendall asked.

“Oh, there’s no difficulty there. He was shot.” Phil wiped his mouth with his napkin and called to the kitchen, “Marie, this is marvelous!”

“Would you like more?”

“As long as you’re up.”

Francis Stendall had reached a numbed point where further information simply registered without reaction on his part.

“What about the money?”

“That should be easier.”

“How much is there?” Roger Dowling asked.

“It’s difficult to say. Some of the companies may be defunct, or they may have been absorbed by others. But it will amount to a large sum.”

“Who does it belong to?”

Keegan shrugged. “All I know is that Whelan said he was going to talk to his lawyer. He thinks if it was found in his yard it ought to be his.”

“Does he want the corpse, too?”

Phil was watching Marie refill his plate. He smiled at Roger Dowling. “I’ll ask him.”

“More lasagna, Francis?” Marie asked their other guest.

“No. No, thanks. It’s good.”

“You should eat.”

This nostrum held little appeal for him, and Roger Dow-

ling felt sorry for the man. He had come on a pious mission, keeping a promise to his mother, and was caught up in a mystifying business.

Over the next several days, some things became clear. Or rather, things became more obscure when the conclusion became unavoidable that the man who had been dug up in the Whelans' back yard was Stendall's father. Roger Dowling had asked Stendall if he would like to stay in a guest room at the rectory while this baffling matter was being investigated, and he accepted with relief.

"I'll turn in my rented car, too. It's costing me a fortune." As a teacher, Stendall did not have money to throw around and Roger Dowling was happy to help him cut down on his expenses. When Phil called the rectory to reveal the startling turn of events, Stendall was upstairs reading.

"The damndest thing, Roger. The dental records match those of a man who served in the First World War whose name was Philip Stendall."

"And he was about thirty when he died?"

"Do me a favor, Roger. Ask him what his father's name was."

"Philip," Francis Stendall answered. "Why?"

"What kind of man was he?"

"We didn't have many photographs of him and my mother was reluctant to talk about him. I do have a diary he kept in France."

"France?"

"He was in the AEF in World War I. He was gassed and sickly, and I guess that's why he died so young. He was a delayed casualty of the war."

"Did he die in California?"

Stendall nodded. "Why all the questions?"

"Francis, there is a possibility that the buried body is that of your father."

There was no way to cushion the blow, so he didn't try. Poor Stendall had been absorbing so much psychic punishment that this added horror brought no visible reaction. His cigarette had hesitated as he brought it to his lips, but he dragged on it and then let smoke slip from his mouth.

"My father."

"Is it possible he never went to California?"

"I have only my mother's word." He smiled sadly. "I asked her where he was buried and she said a military cemetery. That was one of the things I always wanted to do, find out where he was buried, visit his grave. The tomb of the unknown father."

He fell silent. Neither of them said anything about the fact that the body of a dead stranger

was now Stendall's father. The big question remained: Who had killed him?

Stendall excused himself, saying he wanted some air, some time to think about all this. From the window Roger Dowling watched the man pace back and forth on the triangular walkway that ran between rectory and school and church. He disappeared into the church for a time and then emerged. Roger Dowling had gone back to his desk, and when he looked out again he saw Stendall talking with Erickson. Stendall tried to get away, but Erickson stayed with him. Finally they parted and Stendall came inside.

"I see you met Erickson, the old fellow."

"He didn't say what his name was. That's a good idea, using the school for old people."

"It's a place for them to come."

"Are they all parishioners?"

"Mostly. We don't turn anyone away. Erickson has lived in the parish forever, I guess."

"He wanted to know if I did. I said no and he asked my name. I really must look woebe-gone."

"Why?"

"I had the impression he was trying to cheer me up." He sighed. "I guess there's no escaping the fact that my mother killed my father."

Roger Dowling said nothing.

"It's the only way it makes

sense. The guilt she felt was real enough, but she couldn't tell me the source of it, not even when she was dying. I guess I'm not surprised. But she had made up her mind she wanted me to know what she had done."

"Why?"

"The stocks? I don't know. Where did they come from?"

That was the other clarification that did not clarify. No report of missing stocks had shown up. No robbery, no misappropriation of funds. Stendall had thought his father was an invalid, that he had received a pension until he died. But there was no record of his having been gassed or wounded in any way. He had not received a pension.

The Stendalls had had a phone, a forty call number as it was classified, a special low rate unless the number of their calls exceeded forty a month.

Cy Horvath paused and looked across the desk at Father Dowling. "That's the kind of thing they've filled computers with."

"Where did Stendall work?"

"He was a bank guard."

Roger Dowling's brows lifted. "Is that where the money came from?"

Horvath shook his head. "There is still no indication on that. We've got people inheriting money, that sort of thing, but no big theft. Twenty-five

dollars would have counted as a major haul in the early thirties."

Who would get it? Jennings Whelan called to ask Father Dowling to stop by. An urgent matter. Dowling went over, wondering if the odd events of recent days had prompted a change of heart in Whelan, but the urgent matter did not concern the recalcitrant parishioner's soul.

"Imelda is mad as blazes because I say that money is ours. Can you imagine that?"

"Mr. Whelan, right now I can imagine almost anything."

"Would you talk with her?"

"To what purpose?"

"Talk some sense into her."

"You mean, persuade her you should initiate lengthy, costly legal proceedings of dubious outcome?"

Whelan threw back his shoulders. "You've been talking with Amos Cadbury."

"Is he your lawyer?"

"Not on this matter! He doesn't think the court would go my way, necessarily. Do you know why?"

Roger Dowling shook his head. "I haven't discussed it with Amos."

"I'll tell you why. Because I'm not an heir or consign of the poor devil they dug up. Does he think they're going to find a relative when they don't know who he is?"

"They've identified him, Mr. Whelan. And he does have an heir."

Whelan's face went blank and he sat down. "You're not just saying that?"

Imelda Whelan, who must have been listening from another room, came and put her arm about her husband.

"Who was he, Father?"

"A man named Stendall."

"No. I meant the corpse."

"That's what I mean. It appears that the body is that of the father of the man who asked that it be dug up."

"Telling us it was a baby!"

Whelan shook his head at the baseness of mankind. "He knew it was his father and he knew there was money."

"How did he die?" Imelda asked.

"He was shot."

"Killed himself and tried to take it with him?" But even Whelan saw the silliness of that remark. He said, "I have been assuming they wouldn't be able to identify him."

Imelda patted her husband's shoulder. The remark was equivalent to a statement of a complete change of heart. He was going to reject his dreams of avarice.

Amos Cadbury was more than willing to represent Francis Stendall in any claim he wished to

make for the money. "If it isn't stolen and it was found with him and the man is his son, I should think the decision would go in his favor. Of course there will be taxes. And my fee. Both exorbitant, needless to say." Amos paused. The silence indicated he had made a joke. "That will still leave a considerable sum."

"I will suggest that he contact you."

But Francis Stendall shook his head. "No, Father. I don't want it. I don't know where it came from or how it got into the grave with him, but it doesn't interest me."

"You might want to think about it before you decide."

"I won't change my mind. It would be ghoulish. Do you know what I thought of when you first mentioned the money? *Treasure Island*. I would bet there is some story of greed and treachery that explains the money. Dear God, I wish my mother were still alive so I could ask her some questions. Why did she want to put me through this?"

"When you first talked to me it was with the intention of re-burying an infant in consecrated ground."

He nodded. "Of course. Could we do that for my father?"

"Certainly."

"A funeral mass, too?" He shook his head. "After all these

years I'll be able to attend my father's funeral. And only weeks after attending my mother's."

"Maybe that is what she really wanted, not to put you through an agonizing experience."

"She should have told me."

"It is not easy for us to admit to having done something so wrong."

"Murder?"

"We don't know that."

"That is what is hard. Not knowing."

Agnes Lamb continued the routine search, trying to locate anyone who had been neighbors of the Stendalls all those years ago. And she came up with two people, a man and a woman, unrelated, who had lived as children in the neighborhood. They were both in their sixties and, somewhat to Agnes's surprise, seemed to consider it perfectly normal to be asked about a neighborhood as it had been well over half a century ago.

"They talk about it as if nothing had changed. The man, Peters, can close his eyes and name every family on the block, both sides of the street. Of course, he still lives there."

"In the same house?"

"When he married he brought his wife home and they stayed there when his parents died. The woman's memory is much more selective."

"How so?" Roger Dowling noticed how Keegan looked on with approval as Agnes showed how good she was. He had come downtown to Phil's office to hear what she had found.

"She remembers her mother talking about the Stendalls. One or the other was being unfaithful, she doesn't remember which, if she ever did know. The move to California was meant to solve that problem."

"Remove one or the other from temptation?"

"That's right. Rose says her mother always thought it was someone who lived right there on the block."

"Well, well."

Phil said, "Tell him your theory, Agnes."

She made a little bow. "I say he was the one fooling around and that mama put him in the cold, cold ground. The California move was meant to cover that. Or maybe they decided to go and he started acting up again, a last fling."

"Why the money?" Roger Dowling asked.

"That is the flaw in the ointment, Father," Agnes said. "But I don't know any theory that's going to make burying that much money and just leaving it there make much sense."

"Maybe leaving it there wasn't part of the plan."

"Well, then the plan fell through."

Of course it could have been buried by mistake, but such explanations were considered the last refuge of the scoundrel in Phil Keegan's department. He urged his people to live in a completely determined universe; every event had a cause. Just sometimes they weren't able to find it. But that is what they must say, not that something just happened one way as opposed to a million others.

Agnes handed him a printout of her findings. They were counting on him to keep Stendall informed, figuring he had a right to know whatever they learned. But how much more bad news about his parents could the poor fellow take?

On the way back to St. Hilary's Roger Dowling decided that the remarks by the woman Agnes called Rose could be regarded as mere gossip and there was no need to pass it on to Francis Stendall. If something further came to light, maybe, but for the nonce he would not add further to Stendall's load.

The memorial Mass and burial service for Stendall *père* went off with some pomp and circumstance. Marie urged the stalwarts of the parish to be there, and Mrs. Hoppers suggested to the oldsters at the school that they might want to attend. Erickson, of all people, volun-

teered to line them up and march them over.

It was difficult to know whether Erickson knew anything about Stendall's situation, but he at least guessed the younger man had received bad news of some kind and required moral support. More than once Roger Dowling looked out to see Stendall and Erickson pacing back and forth on the parish sidewalks.

"What does he say?" Roger Dowling asked, curious.

Stendall laughed. "He doesn't get a chance to say much. I have to keep reminding myself to put questions to him. So far I've told him a lot about Mother. There isn't much I want to say about my father just now."

"I hope you haven't decided we know how your father died."

Stendall started to say something, then stopped. "Oh, it doesn't matter. I talk about growing up in California. I guess I'm looking for clues in those years for what is coming to light now. My mother was a good woman, Father. As you say, we don't know how my father died, but the fact remains that she was a good mother to me."

Aside from a few lies and deceptions. Well, Erickson might be an ideal sounding board for a man who was trying to salvage as much of his past as he could.

Mervel of the Fox River *Tribune* got wind of what had been happening and wanted to interview Stendall.

"Why are you calling me?" Roger Dowling said, crossing his fingers.

"Peanuts Pianone says he's been staying with you. Is that right?"

"He has been through a lot, Mervel. I really don't think he should be put through any more. Whatever story there is is over half a century old."

"That's the story!"

"Are things that slow?"

"Father, I understand what you're saying. Reacting just personally, I might feel exactly the way you do. But I have a duty to my readers. And those readers have a right to know."

A right to know what Mervel and others like him decided people should know. "Why don't you talk with Mr. Stendall about it?"

"That's why I'm calling."

"He is out of the house at the moment. Where should he call you?"

"I'll call him," Mervel said, his voice heavy with skepticism. But Stendall had left the house, if only to go over to the school and give Edna Hospers a hand. "It occurred to me that most of them are the age of my parents. The men are the age my father would have been."

It was remembering that remark that led Roger Dowling reluctantly to pick up the phone and call Phil Keegan.

"Phil, did Agnes check on births during those years."

"Whose?"

"Was Stendall born here or in California?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"I'm just curious."

"What was he told?"

"California."

"He must have a birth certificate."

"Would you ask Agnes and have her call me?"

"What are policemen for? What did he think of the story Agnes dug up about his parents?"

"I didn't tell him. How do we know it's true?"

"Maybe you're right."

Agnes dropped by a Xeroxed copy of the birth announcement and Roger Dowling read that a son had been born to the Stendalls of 3306 Macon Street on April 20th at home. Perhaps being born at home was not all that unusual at the time, but the memory of Stendall's original story when he came to the rectory gave the priest an odd feeling.

He put the Xeroxed page in his desk drawer along with the papers Agnes had given him a few days before.

"Jennings Whelan is with

us." Marie Murkin whispered this stagily as she stood in the door of his study.

"Show him in."

"Not here in the rectory." She gave him a look. "At the school. With the other old people. Maybe it's a first step."

And maybe not. Should he drop by the school and accidentally run into Whelan? A tempting idea, but first he wanted to have a talk with his houseguest. Francis Stendall had said the night before that he would be heading back to California soon. He hadn't done what he had come to do, but no doubt he had accomplished what his mother had in mind when she gave him those instructions. He had stood at his father's new grave the previous day, a lonely figure, staring down at the rather sumptuous casket that contained what was left of his father after more than half a century mouldering in the back yard of the house on Macon Street. To think of a man Stendall's age as an orphan was odd, but he had the look of a man who had been abandoned by both his parents. No wonder he wanted to go back to his own life now and escape the haunting presence of his mother and father. But Roger Dowling thought he should stay on at least for a few days more.

"What's the point, Father? I

feel like a parasite as it is, camping in your rectory like this."

"Nonsense. Marie appreciates someone with a better appetite than I have."

"I can't understand why you're not overweight. She is a wonderful cook."

And so she was. He had decided early in his tenure as pastor that he would have to hide behind the excuse of an inadequate appetite or he would balloon up like a monsignor.

"They sent over the notice of your birth in the local paper if you'd like to see it?"

He shook his head. "That's one thing I am sure of, that I was born."

Roger Dowling did not push the matter. But it was agreed that Stendall would stay several more days at least.

"It sounds morbid, but if I do stay, I'd like to see that house."

"The Whelans? I'll see if I can arrange it."

Equipped with an excuse, Roger Dowling sauntered over to the school. He dropped by Mrs. 'Hospers' office and they talked a bit about the program she had developed. What he liked about it was that it left the old people to figure out many of the activities themselves. How awful it would be to fall into the hands of some breathless enthusiast who would insist you must keep busy, do

this and that, whatever your inclinations.

When he went to what had been the gym, there were card games in process, three checker matches, one game of chess, and, of course, shuffleboard. The one game all the old people seemed to like was shuffleboard. And there indeed was Jennings Whelan, playing a game with Erickson. Roger Dowling stopped at a checker game not far from the shuffleboard area, kibitzing a while, giving Whelan a chance to notice him and disappear if he liked. But the game went on and Roger Dowling went over just as Erickson, with a practiced push, managed to remove all Whelan's markers from the target area.

"Damn it!" shouted Whelan and turned to Roger Dowling. "Did you see what that burglar did?"

"It's part of the game," Erickson said, clearly enjoying himself.

"I was counting on beginner's luck," Whelan moaned as they trudged to the other end of the playing area.

It soon became clear to Whelan that he was no match for Erickson and he returned his pole to the rack.

"I'm going to quit while I still have my house."

"Speaking of which," Roger Dowling said, and Whe-

lan's eyebrows went up.

"Oh, no. Not another archaeological dig in my back yard."

"Only metaphorically. Stendall wondered if you'd let him come visit the house."

"Why not? He managed to get the back yard ruined. He never did see the result of that, did he? Sure, send him over."

"When would be a good time?"

"Well, Carl and I are moseying back home now. He can come along, if he wants."

"Carl's going, too?"

"To his own house, of course. He's given up trying to buy mine."

"You're neighbors?"

"For my sins," Whelan said.

"For my sins."

"We must talk about those some day."

"You never quit, do you, Father? You're as bad as Imelda."

"Thank God for Imelda."

Whelan puffed out his lips, then nodded vigorously. "I do. I do. The very words that got me into it and I'd do it again tomorrow. I'm not sure she would, though. Being married to a lapsed Catholic is hard on her."

"It's harder on you."

"Where is this young Stendall? We've got to get going. Right, Carl?"

"I think I'll stay," Erickson said. "You have someone to

walk with now. You don't need me."

"Were you going just to do me a favor?"

Erickson didn't answer.

After Stendall and Whelan had gone, Roger Dowling sat at the desk in his study, smoking his pipe, looking straight ahead but not seeing anything.

After a few minutes, he opened the drawer of his desk and took out the first papers Agnes Lamb had given him. The list of residents of Macon Street when Stendall's parents had lived there. Was he really surprised to find the name of Carl Erickson on the list? And what did it mean? One thing it explained was Erickson's interest in Francis Stendall. He had known his parents, though apparently he had not admitted this to Agnes Lamb. Might he even have seen Francis as an infant? Not impossible. But Roger Dowling had the feeling that there was more.

He called Mrs. Hospers. "Edna, would you ask Carl Erickson if he would like to join me for lunch? After the noon Mass. Tell him I would particularly like him to come."

One of the advantages of saying Mass facing the people—a change that had followed on Vatican II—was that he knew who was in church. Carl Erickson was not there, and he won-

dered if he would show up for lunch.

"You have a guest," Marie Murkin said when he came in the kitchen door. Another answered prayer. "He's in the study."

"How glad I am you could come," Roger Dowling said when he joined Erickson.

"I don't have that busy a schedule, Father. Not any more."

"Lucky man. Come, let's have our lunch."

Where had he gotten the impression that Carl Erickson was a doddering old imbecile? He was an enjoyable table companion, with many amusing observations about growing old, and much praise for what Mrs. Hospers was doing in the school.

"I was surprised to see Jennings Whelan there this morning."

"I suggested he come."

"Are you friends?"

"I think of him as one of the new boys on the block."

"Ah, the block. I want to talk with you about that. When we go back to the study."

"I noticed you have a complete set of St. Augustine."

"Oh, yes. I've been reading him for years."

"I know only the *Confessions*."

"Have you read it.?"

"It has become a favorite. A

good book for old sinners."

When they had adjourned to the study, it was easy to continue the conversation along those lines. "You seem struck by the story of Francis Stendall."

For the first time, Erickson seemed ill at ease. "It is a fairly incredible happening."

"Did you know his parents?"

There are gestures, looks, remarks that prove to be *open sesame*, and that question sufficed to open Erickson's heart.

"I had wondered if that would become known. The police called and asked about the Stendalls—they knew I had lived on the block in those days—and I am afraid I lied to them. But in many ways I have been living a lie for all these years."

Roger Dowling knew that all he need do was wait, be silent, be receptive, and the story would be told.

And what a story it was. Carl Erickson had been Mrs. Stendall's lover. He used that term, not without irony. "That makes it sound much more romantic than it was. Those were gray days, Father. Impoverished days. A movie was an event. Her husband worked nights as a bank guard, my wife was tending to her sister's children, I asked Rosemary to go to the movies. It was one of those frothy Depression pictures. They

plied us with tales of the idle rich at a time when a square meal was rare for many. That is how it started."

It ended with Rosemary getting pregnant. Her husband was upset. "He lived almost like a monk just so she wouldn't have children, not yet, and here she was, pregnant. Both Rosemary and I formed the idea that the child was mine."

"Was it?"

Erickson looked at Roger Dowling in anguish. "I don't know. She didn't know. There was no way of knowing for sure. But she said she was sure. The child was mine. I felt as much terror as joy. I had a wife, Rosemary had a husband. It was an impossible situation. And they quarreled constantly about her pregnancy. He decided they would move to California. Like so many others, he had the notion you could live in California on nothing. There was sun, there was fruit, it sounded like paradise. She thought it a crazy idea. We decided to run away. I had no money, but I had lots of worthless stock as it then was, but stock in which I never lost hope. I put all the certificates in a valise; they would go with us. Other bags were packed and waiting. I was ready to desert my wife." He said this as if even now, after all these years, he could not believe his intended perfidy. "But I had

already been unfaithful. I seemed caught up in something that deprived me of my freedom."

And then came an awful night, a weekend when her husband was home, just days before the planned flight. They argued and she told him her child was not his. He became enraged. "She telephoned me and I went over."

He paused. "There are moments in life when everything is settled. They do not announce themselves as so significant, but in the event they are the great hinges on which everything turns.

"When I showed up, not knowing what she had told him, he immediately drew the appropriate inference. He lunged at me. We fought. He was much stronger than I. I thought he would kill me until there was a shot. She had killed him with his own revolver."

The dead body of the husband had purged them both. Any thought of running away together was now repugnant. It was one thing to be joined by a child, but to have a killing link them was too much. And so they had decided to do what they had done. In the still of the night—there was no moon—Erickson dug the grave. Meanwhile, she got gunny sacks from the basement and wrapped him. "She seemed to want to

make him warm." And then Erickson carried him out into the back yard and buried him. Before he covered the body, in a fit of disgust, as a symbol that he was rejecting his plan to flee, he pitched the valise into the grave and covered it and the body.

"I could hardly believe afterward what labor I had engaged in. Yet I did it swiftly and effortlessly, carried along by panic. When I was done, we decided she would say her husband had left for California. She would follow after her baby was born. I would let it be known that they had impetuously decided to put his romantic plan into effect."

After she left, there was complete silence. She did not write. He did not know where she was or even if she had actually gone to California.

"The house was sold, then sold again to Jennings Whelan, and from time to time I would dread that the body would somehow be discovered. But I had dug deep, at least six feet, that seemed important, and there was little danger."

"Whelan said you tried to buy the house."

Erickson looked away. "I was motivated by greed rather than fear. Those worthless stocks are far from worthless now. The companies revived, shares split and split again. I do not dare

guess what they are worth. I used to dream of ways of digging up that valise but nothing feasible ever occurred to me. And then a year ago I heard from Rosemary."

He held his hands in a praying position and brought the tips of his fingers to his lips.

"She was dying. She was determined to tell her son what had happened."

"She wrote you?"

"Yes, and I telephoned her, many times. Her voice sounded unchanged and it was like talking to the half hysterical woman I had parted from that awful night. I begged her to keep the secret. What difference did it make? Her answer was that her conscience bothered her. Not the murder, she had long since confessed that, but the thought of him lying there wrapped in gunny sacks in unconsecrated ground. I was still trying to dissuade her when she died. You can imagine what it has been like for me during these past days."

Roger Dowling let silence settle, a not uncomfortable silence. It was clear that Erickson was relieved finally to have told what had happened.

Roger Dowling said softly, "I doubt very much that anyone will guess what happened."

"But you must tell the police?"

The priest shook his head.

"No. I don't think so. If a crime was committed, it was not by you. Unless the burial was a crime, and that has been rectified now."

After Francis Stendall had left for California, his strange visit over, Father Dowling missed him. Even Marie lamented not having another mouth to feed. Amos Cadbury had convinced Stendall not to disclaim the stocks until he had given it more thought.

"I won't change my mind," Stendall told Roger Dowling.

"You can give it to charity. Think of something you would like to support."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Father."

Erickson drove Stendall to

the airport with who knew what emotions. Was he saying farewell to a son or not? Phil Keegan had problems of his own.

"I hate a crime where there is no criminal to indict," Phil said. It was received opinion that the wife had killed the husband.

"Well! no one profited from the crime, anyway."

"I would like to know why that valise was buried with the body. There must be a perfectly logical explanation of that."

"Remorse?"

Phil laughed. It seemed to cheer him up. Marie, drawn by the laughter, brought Phil a beer, and they settled down to watch the Cubs. Perhaps there was a logical explanation for that, too, but Roger Dowling did not know it.

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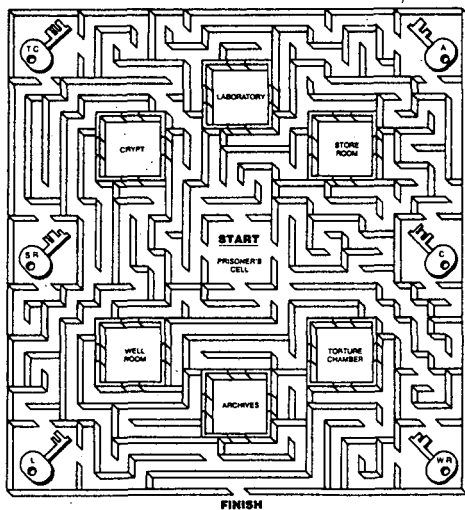
UNSOLVED

by R. Wayne
Schmittberger

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

This is the thirteenth century dungeon maze of the infamous Balmanian Inquisition, in which, according to legend, thousands of men and women perished. Balmanian prisoners faced a cruel obstacle in trying to negotiate the maze, as they had to grope their way in the dark while pursued by a pack of wild dogs. By contrast, the puzzle as presented here should be almost child's play. The plan for the dungeon shows the prisoner's cell in the middle (marked START), a network of hallways, six locked rooms, and six key rooms located on the periphery. To enter or leave a locked room, you must first secure the appropriate key: Key TC unlocks the Torture Chamber, Key A unlocks the Archives, and so on. Once a room has been unlocked, it remains unlocked, and you may carry as many keys as you wish. Retracing your steps is allowed. To escape, in what order must you visit the rooms?



See page 147 for the solution to the April puzzle.

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Past Forgetting

by Bruce Scates



One morning at the breakfast table Naomi Bingham, age seventy-one, thought she asked her husband to pass the sugar. He looked at her in a peculiar way, got up, left the room, and

returned with a pair of scuba flippers.

"Didn't know you were interested in that any more," Hadley Bingham remarked, passing the flippers to her and sitting down to his grapefruit.

"Sugar," she said. "I asked you to pass the sugar."

"I *got* you the flippers," he replied. "There they are, right in your hand."

"S-U-G-A-R. *Sugar!*" Naomi nearly shouted.

Hadley stared at her. "I know perfectly well how 'flippers' is spelled. *You* forgot the second 'p.'"

Naomi glowered. "Miss Gubbins," she snapped at her live-in nurse, who sat at the other end of the long table, "what did I ask Mr. Bingham to pass me?"

"Your flippers, Mrs. Bingham."

The flippers made a *flap-flap* sound as they sailed through the air and landed several feet past Emmie Gubbins' chair.

Naomi Bingham lifted her cup of coffee (sugarless) to her lips (tightly compressed) with a hand that trembled (fearfully). Naomi had always been terrified of becoming senile. Of losing her memory, of becoming confused, of becoming less than the wealthy, selfish, iron-willed and domineering woman she had always been. Above all, perhaps, of becoming dependent on Hadley Bingham, whom, more than anyone, she had dominated and thoroughly enjoyed dominating for forty-five years.

The blows fell in rapid succession.

Later that same morning, with the arrival of the mail, Naomi discovered that she had joined the Sierra Club and six other conservation groups, as well as an anti-vivisection league and, worst of all, a committee against the killing of animals for their fur.

She had no recollection of applying to join any of the groups. She *hated* conservation groups (she had extensive investments in lumber and oil), and she *loved* having animals killed (by someone else) for their fur. That is, for *her* fur.

An awful thought occurring to Naomi, she took the elevator and sped her motorized wheelchair along corridors until she reached a lengthy expanse of doors. She slid one open . . .

"But, my dear," explained Hadley when eventually she paused in her screaming, "you said to sell them—*all* of your fur coats. Don't you remember? And to send the proceeds to those conservation groups. I thought it was . . . *noble* of you, Naomi. Surely you *remember?*"

In the afternoon she discovered that she had joined the Democratic Party. She *must* be losing her mind, she thought. "Next thing, you'll be telling me I've joined a committee for closing tax loopholes for the rich or—or a *bowling league!*"

The next day Hadley told her she had joined a Committee for

Closing Tax Loopholes for the Rich and a bowling league.

People would have been surprised to learn that Naomi and Hadley Bingham were a contentedly married couple. Surprised because few could imagine wanting to marry either of the pair, let alone desiring to stay in that condition. The only thing attractive about Naomi was her bank account; the only thing attractive about Hadley was the loving devotion he had given to that bank account for the forty-five years of their marriage.

She was a bulky, lumbering woman with a little-girl voice that contrasted oddly with her size, as if a Pershing tank had a bicycle bell. (But it worked: when she spoke, people jumped—Hadley the quickest and highest.) Besides several million dollars, a hippo-ish body that dwindled to spindly calves and tiny feet, a head of blindly red curls, temperamental little pale eyes beneath the curls, and an underdeveloped, overprivileged mind that she frequently changed, she had prize-winning begonias, four thousand orchids, and a valuable collection of porcelain.

She also had Hadley Bingham. He was short, unobtrusive, dull. He possessed a

mildly smiling, absent-minded manner, baby-blue bow ties, and a gray mustache that was slightly rumpled and uncertain-looking, as if, like Hadley, it didn't quite know how it had gotten where it was. Because of the smile he almost perpetually wore in spite of being married to Naomi, Hadley might have been regarded as an idiot had it not been for his talent at handling the large estate Naomi was left by her father.

Why had they married and why had they been content?

Hadley wanted to be rich and was irresistibly drawn to institutions and individuals that were rich. To Hadley, the Chase Manhattan Bank, with its size and bulk and above all its large deposits of money, was more beautiful and stirring than the Acropolis; similarly, Naomi Potter, who in scale and bulk and voluptuous deposits rather resembled the Chase Manhattan Bank, was more beautiful and desirable than any actress or model with better bones but skinnier deposits. Hadley was also an uncertain person who liked being ordered about by people who were certain they were right—and Naomi was always certain, if not always right. And she always ordered.

There was also the matter of the gorilla, the swimming pool, and Love At First Sight.

As for Naomi, she wanted something at her side that was constantly attentive, amiable, loyal, and worshipful—and yet didn't have fleas or a tail. The wonderful thing about Hadley was that he was always attentive, amiable, loyal, and worshipful—and a Republican—but he could also be exhibited at social functions as an example of genus *husband* or even, occasionally, *male*. And he only had bow ties.

There was also the matter of the gorilla, the swimming pool, and Love At First Sight: Hadley and Naomi had met as children, at a costume party at a country club. Hadley, for the last time in his life at a public occasion, was not dressed conservatively. He was dressed as a gorilla.

Suddenly, by the swimming pool, he saw: Another Gorilla. When this other gorilla came shuffling over to him, swinging its arms, and proceeded to snarl in a little-girl voice, "Rat—you came in *my* costume!" and pushed him into the pool—it was Love At First Sight.

As for Naomi: there was something about the way the insignificant, timid boy stood there after being hauled out of the pool—dripping wet, sniffing, blowing his nose into the now-removed gorilla mask—and admitted to various adults that

he had fallen into the pool all by himself . . . that caused a glow inside Naomi and made her push him into the pool again.

It was Love At First Sight.

Naomi Bingham had thought things couldn't get any worse than joining the Democratic Party, an anti-tax loophole committee, and a bowling league.

The next day she had her nurse, Miss Emmie Gubbins, push her wheelchair into the conservatory. (There was nothing wrong with the wheelchair's motor; she just liked to hear Miss Gubbins' grunts.) The conservatory contained Naomi's prize-winning begonias and orchids.

"Oh!" cried Miss Gubbins, staring.

"AAAAAAARRRRRRRRGGGGHHH!" added Naomi.

On row after row of tables, in line after line of pots . . .

"But, my dear," explained Hadley, "it's obvious that you must have forgotten to water them for several days now."

"I water them *every* day! Dammit, I watered them yesterday! I'm—I'm sure of it."

"But you couldn't have, Naomi dear. Look at them. Dry as dust. All of them quite, quite dead—"

"—murdered!"

"There, there. Don't blame yourself. You *forgot*, that's all. It can happen to anyone, my dear—at your age."

"Murdered," repeated Naomi from her wheelchair.

She still had her porcelain and her social position. And, of course, Hadley.

That afternoon, to console herself, she visited her porcelain collection. It was displayed in what had once been her father's ballroom, in cabinet after cabinet, on row after row of shelves . . .

THE SHELVES WERE EMPTY!

"But, my dear," explained Hadley, "don't you *remember*? You told me—that is, of course, you ordered me—to *sell* them. All those . . . really delightful little milkmaids and shepherds and puppy dog figures."

"I couldn't have!"

"But I am afraid you did. You just don't remember, my dear."

"Murdered!"

"You're tired, Naomi. Emmie—Miss Gubbins—will take you back to your bed."

"I'm *not* tired!"

"It takes so little to tire you these days, my dear. And then we get confused, don't we? We forget things. And that could be . . . dangerous."

"Rat." Naomi glared at Hadley. "*Slimy snake.*"

Memories flooded back: for a moment, Hadley was reminded of the nasty fat girl in the gorilla suit. He looked at Naomi almost fondly; then he remembered that she was after all his wife.

"Take Mrs. Bingham to bed, Miss Gubbins."

"Skunk. Toad. Weasel."

"How did you do it, honey?"

"The dry flowers? Oh, one of those heavy-duty blow-dryer things."

"You're so clever."

One of the things Hadley Bingham liked about Emmie Gubbins was that she said things like that. Naomi never did.

"Come to bed, sweetie."

That was another thing that Emmie Gubbins said that Hadley liked to hear. Meeting her had been quite rejuvenating.

"I think I'll wear my you-know-what," announced Hadley.

"Do you have to?"

"You . . . don't want me to?"

"Of course I *want* you to," corrected Emmie quickly. "But I was thinking of *you*. It tires you out so. And you have so much left to do with Mrs. Bingham."

"Nonsense. I feel as strong as a mountain gorilla."

"You'll have to be. She's a tough old bat."

"An adult male mountain gorilla, my dear, has the strength

of a good five men, at least. And who knows how many old bats?"

Emmie Gubbins smiled from the bed. "All right, cupcake. You go right ahead and put it on."

Humming softly, Hadley Bingham opened the special case and removed the gorilla suit.

Emmie Gubbins ordinarily didn't find men in gorilla suits attractive, but she found easily dominated small rich men in gorilla suits (who would be even richer when their wives were dead) absolutely irresistible. She was a muscular, somewhat stumpy-legged, long-armed woman with a dominating personality who in many ways resembled Naomi Bingham. Except for one thing. She believed it was the little things a girl had to do sometimes to keep a man happy. She felt Naomi had never realized that.

"How do I look?"

Emmie gazed at the hairy figure swinging its arms in front of it.

"Terrifying, lambchop." She added: "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Forgotten something?" The narrow anthropoid forehead with its dark, matted hair creased with puzzlement: a paw scratched.

"Really, honey—you're more absent-minded than *she* these days."

"Give me a hint?"

"AH-a-AH-a-AH—".

"My, my, good heavens yes, I remember now!"

The shaggy figure began beating its chest enthusiastically.

Yes, one little thing. With a sigh, Emmie climbed out of bed. Putting on her gorilla mask, she crouched forward and began to swing her arms.

By golly, she certainly had the arms for it, Hadley noted admiringly.

Naomi still had her Social Position . . .

After the calamity of her plants and her porcelain, Naomi sulked in bed all the next day. But that night she had Miss Gubbins push her wheelchair into the dining room; Naomi entered wearing a bathrobe with huge purple and yellow flowers printed on it; her hair sprouted curlers.

She was startled to discover three couples—the Colliers, the Herberts, the Osborns—seated with Hadley at the dinner table. All, including Hadley, staring at her and looking at least as equally startled. Theodore Collier was the president of a large bank and his wife of the local DAR chapter; Dr. Herbert was not only Naomi's physician but his wife was president of the Garden Club; and Stephen and Stella Osborn were, with

the possible exception of the Colliers and the Herberts, about the last people she would like to be seen in front of wearing curlers and a purple-and yellow-flowered bathrobe.

Hadley cleared his throat. "I expect you've forgotten we're having guests tonight, haven't you, my dear?"

After a silence, Stella Osborn said, "That is certainly a . . . *vivid* robe, Naomi."

Angela Collier snickered.

Naomi, glaring venomously in all directions, was pushed in her wheelchair to her place at the table. Silently she raged: why on earth had Hadley ever invited Stella Osborn or her equally snide husband? Or the Colliers or the Herberts? They were *her* social connections—Hadley detested them. Naomi couldn't understand it. *Why?*

"Didn't you hear me, my dear? I said, you had better take your pills now."

Hadley pointed: there were two white pills next to Naomi's water glass.

"I've had my pills," said Naomi. "Half an hour ago, when you brought them to my room. Don't you remember?"

"My dear, you're mistaken. You're forgetting that you refused to take them. You promised to have them at dinner. Take the pills now, my dear."

Hadley smiled; a bead of sweat appeared on his forehead.

Naomi pushed the pills away from her. "I remember perfectly clearly taking them."

Hadley smiled apologetically at their guests. "We promised we were going to be good tonight, dear, didn't we? I'm sure your friend Dr. Herbert would like you to take the medicine he has prescribed for you—wouldn't you, Dr. Herbert?"

"I would indeed!" said Dr. Herbert, smiling.

"I've taken my pills already," repeated Naomi. "Two *more* of them might be dangerous."

"But, my dear, you haven't taken them yet," said Hadley. "You're confused. Take them now, please." He looked at the pills, not her.

Naomi shook her head so violently her curlers threatened to eject. "Dammit, Hadley, I'm not going to be poisoned by an overdose!" she snapped. "No matter what you say!"

"Poisoned?" echoed Hadley. He transferred a shocked expression from Naomi to their guests. "Surely you don't think Dr. Herbert and—and myself—are trying to *poison* you, do you, Naomi?"

"Dear, dear, dear . . ." murmured Dr. Herbert.

Hadley Bingham's expression segued from the shocked to the martyred. Even his mus-

tache looked hurt. "I fear, Naomi, that you are getting into a condition of imagining that everyone around you is conspiring against you, even those most devoted to you—such as Miss Gubbins and myself."

Naomi didn't appear to be listening. "Poison," she murmured. She narrowed her small eyes at Hadley thoughtfully, ominously.

"And now," continued Hadley, oblivious, "now you suspect your physician as well as your own husband of trying to—trying to poison you."

"Dear, dear, dear . . ." cooed Dr. Herbert.

"Quack, quack, quack!" exploded Naomi suddenly. She stuck her tongue out at the physician. "*Quack!*"

The pills made a *pu-pu-pu* sound (inaudible to human ears) as they arched through the air and flew past Dr. Herbert's shoulder.

Shooting her wheelchair back from the dinner table, Naomi lurched to her feet, her Humpty Dumpty body swaying. (There was nothing actually wrong with her legs, it was just that at her time of wealth it was such a bore to walk.)

"You seem to forget, my dear," said Hadley, "that you can't walk."

"You forget—I can!" replied Naomi. "But then you've al-

ways been far more *absent-minded* than me, Hadley. For instance, you're wearing one red sock and one green sock. And you've been pinching *my* leg and not Stella Osborn's, you old goat. You also forget that I was the best pitcher on the varsity softball team," she added, picking up a salt shaker.

The salt shaker blurred past Hadley's left ear.

"Now high and inside!" cried Naomi, winding up.

Hadley joined his guests hastily under the dinner table.

"*Slider!*"

Overhead could be heard a steady shattering of china and glass and an unpleasantly boisterous rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Everyone under the table agreed that it was all most unfortunate, and that poor Naomi wasn't responsible for her actions, and of course that anyone who joined an anti-tax loophole committee and a bowling league was tragically capable of anything.

"At least she sounds happy," someone offered.

"*Poor Hadley.*"

"Couldn't have gone better," commented Hadley later to Emmie. "Don't worry—I have her right where I want her."

Next day, humming lightly,

Hadley entered what had been the billiard room. It now contained his beloved collection of metal soldiers, standing in cabinets, on shelf after shelf . . .

THE SHELVES WERE EMPTY!

Hadley rushed upstairs to Naomi's room. Flinging her door open, he immediately tripped, falling forward; a heavy flower pot came hurtling down from where it had been balanced above the door: it missed his head by inches.

On the floor Hadley was in a position to observe a wire running between the door jambs, just above the sill: the door had been booby-trapped.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

Something struck Hadley painfully on his shoulder: glancing up, he saw Naomi looming over him with a thick cane. She began bringing it down repeatedly and enthusiastically on his shoulders, back, head.

"Burglars! Burglars!"

It took Emmie and one of the maids to at last disarm Naomi.

"My God!" gasped Hadley, bruised and badly shaken, "didn't you see it was me?"

"Who?"

"HADLEY!"

"Oh, you're not Hadley. You're not a bit like him."

"Certainly I'm Hadley!"

"Hadley is taller than you,

better looking, and loves me with a shining, pure devotion—"

"That's me!"

"—and is a toadying, scheming little parasite."

"That's *not* me! I mean—I'm not a parasite!"

"*Hadley* is!" she pounced triumphantly.

For a moment Hadley's head whirled as well as ached: he *was* Hadley Bingham, wasn't he? Then, remembering, he roared: "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY TOY SOLDIERS?"

Her face became sly. "*Hadley* asked me to have them sent to the landfill."

"I did not! I did not! I did not!"

"Perhaps," admitted Naomi, "perhaps I got confused again. Like I did when I had Hadley sell my porcelain. Hadley says I get confused and forgetful these days. If you were *really* Hadley, you would know that."

Naomi lowered her voice. "Hadley says I'm senile. He's persuaded everyone else that I am, too. I'm not *responsible*, you see. For anything I do. *Anything*," she repeated with emphasis.

Hadley stared at her: her eyes shone—was it with anticipation? She also somehow looked healthier and more energetic than she had appeared in years. In fact, dammit, she looked stimulated, excited, as

if she was enjoying herself! Whereas he—he felt suddenly old and tired. His toy soldiers: landfilled!

Emmie Gubbins approached them. "I found this under your pillow," she said to Naomi. "What is it supposed to be for?"

In Emmie's hand was a long butcher knife.

"It's a . . . knitting needle, isn't it, dear Miss Gubbins?"

"It's a butcher knife, and you damn well know it!"

"Then perhaps . . . perhaps it's for burglars," replied Naomi. "I'm afraid I can't remember, of course, but that's probably it. Why don't you ask Hadley?" She pointed at Hadley. "Why not send *him* to find Mr. Bingham? Unless he's another of those burglars?"

That night Hadley locked the door connecting his room and Naomi's. He also, puffing heavily, shoved a massive dresser in front of the door. The thought of being "mistaken" again for a burglar made him uneasy.

He didn't sleep at all well.

The next days were sheer hell for Hadley Bingham. Naomi became considerate, sympathetic, cheerful. Hideously cheerful. She wasn't like herself at all. Hadley was filled with alarm. Even worse—she became affectionate.

"For heaven's sake, Naomi—let me go!"

"Don't say anything—just hold me!"

"I can't—can't breathe," gasped Hadley.

"Oh Nigel, Nigel, Nigel—I love you, love you, love you!"

"I'm Ha—Hadley!"

"Hadley's dead, dead, dead. *Poisoned.*"

Emmie didn't escape, either. Naomi began walloping her across the backside with her cane. "I must have mistaken it for something else," she would explain sweetly.

"You've got to *do* something," Emmie demanded of Hadley.

Emmie acquired a persistent headache and it wouldn't go away nor would the gorilla suit come on until Hadley did do something.

The days passed; Hadley couldn't sleep; his stomach began acting up. He became listless. Perhaps it was because Emmie was so grumpy these days; perhaps it was because Naomi was so ungrumpy. "Playful" had become the word for her, he decided gloomily. *Girlish*, damn her.

On this particular morning, she brought him his breakfast in bed. She had done this for several mornings now. She appeared wearing a Girl Scout uniform (a *huge* Girl Scout uni-

form): it added a new horror to the word "girlish." It couldn't have been her old uniform. No one could have looked that appalling at fourteen.

"*Rise and shine!*" Naomi whooped, sounding ready for cheerleader practice. "Cooked absolutely everything on my lonesome over a campfire smack in the peony bed. Just like when the two of us were in good old Troop 173!"

"I was in the Boy Scouts, Naomi," remarked Hadley dully. The eggs and sausages were charred; he sipped at the coffee: it tasted excessively strong, unusually bitter. As he drank, her piggy eyes watched him.

"Oh, by the way," Naomi said, "do you know we've got rats?"

"Oh?"

"Fortunately we've got poison."

"Oh?"

"Only—golly!—I seem to have misplaced it. I wonder if I could've gotten it mixed up with something else? You know how my memory is these days."

Hadley stared at Naomi. She stared at Hadley, eyes gleaming. He returned his gaze to the mug of coffee . . .

"No fair! No *shoving!*" protested Naomi as Hadley departed from the bed, her, and headlong from the room and down the hallway.

"Oh, *Had,*" she hooted after him, "spoilsport, spoilsport!"

Emmie had to use a stomach pump on Hadley.

"She's trying to poison me!" declared Hadley, when he was able to talk. "*Me!* After all I've done for her! She's senile!"

"She's not senile!" insisted Emmie. "She's faking."

"Is she?" Hadley frowned. He wasn't certain any more. Of anything. Events somehow had gotten out of hand—or at least his hand. He wasn't enjoying killing his wife nearly as much as his wife seemed to be. He was confused, off-balance, rattled: he had almost joined the Democratic Party himself the other day. Good heavens—he must be losing *his* mind!

"You're losing your nerve," said Emmie. "You've got to do something about her. And soon."

Hadley seemed too dazed for any kind of action. But he must, of course.

"Ye-e-e-s-s."

The next night, as the three of them sat in the drawing room, Naomi volunteered to fix hot cocoa.

Emmie winked at Hadley: Hadley frowned absently; Emmie scowled: Hadley's face abruptly cleared.

"No, no," protested Hadley. *He* would fix it.

Hadley returned not only with

a tray with three mugs on it but with more of a spring in his step than he had shown for weeks. "This is yours, my dear," he said, indicating a particular mug to Naomi.

Hadley winked at Emmie.

Naomi closed the book she was reading: *Catch Your Prey: A Guide to the Construction and Use of Snares and Traps in the Wild*. Along with her trusty military manual on booby-traps, it was nowadays her favorite reading. On this particular night Naomi was wearing a feathered Indian war bonnet, one of her old Girl Scout jumpers, and a grass skirt she had brought back after a visit to Tahiti.

After taking a sip of the cocoa, Naomi announced: "I think I'll finish this up in my room. So cosy in bed."

As she almost skipped from the room, Naomi paused in the doorway: "Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite!"

Hadley and Emmie mutually winked.

Naomi didn't, however, go directly to her room. She slipped into Hadley's room instead.

Setting her cocoa down and humming "Fifteen Men on the Dead Man's Chest," she swiftly rigged up an inventive variation on the wart-hog snare of the Dyak Indians of Borneo. She used a length of rope, a pul-

ley, and a hook fastened into the eleven foot high ceiling and she placed it just inside Hadley's doorway off the corridor.

Really, she hadn't had so much fun since she had tormented Hadley when they were children.

When Naomi finished, she took another sip of her cocoa. Her face grimaced at the taste. Using the connecting door between her room and Hadley's, she went to her closet, rummaged, and removed a bottle of scotch whisky she kept hidden there. She poured a liberal amount into the cocoa mug . . .

Some little while later, Naomi Bingham became mentally absorbed in a technical point: she couldn't remember if the Borneo wart-hog was left-footed or right-footed. Would the fact that Hadley was right-footed affect the snare, which was designed for perhaps a left-footed wart-hog and not a right-footed husband?

Getting up from the floor where she happened to be lying, Naomi decided to inspect the snare once more. Since she was somewhat confused, however, she entered Hadley's room not by the connecting door but by the corridor door.

Her last words, as she shot toward the high ceiling of Hadley's room, were "Ooops-a-daisy!"

The Borneo wart-hog snare was not intended to bear the weight of a Naomi Bingham: Naomi soared upside-down to the ceiling, there was a loud *crack*, the hook parted—and she plummeted downwards.

When she struck the floor there was another crack.

Meanwhile Hadley and Emmie had decided to celebrate.

As soon as Naomi had left for her room, they had slipped away to Emmie's. First they had finished their cocoa—or rather, Emmie had finished hers and part of his, since Hadley never had liked the taste of cocoa.

Hadley had already put on his gorilla suit and was lying on the bed watching Emmie put on hers (he liked to watch her do this), when he remarked:

"You know, suddenly I don't feel at all well."

"You know," replied Emmie, "I don't either."

"It's my stomach."

"Mine too!"

"Burning."

"Like fire."

"Almost as if—"

"That cocoa—it was—"

"—a trifle bitter?"

Clutching their hairy anthropoid stomachs, the two figures stared at each other, their eyes in the admirably realistic-looking gorilla masks wide with dismay.

"I believe I must have got the mugs mixed up."

"She drank the—"

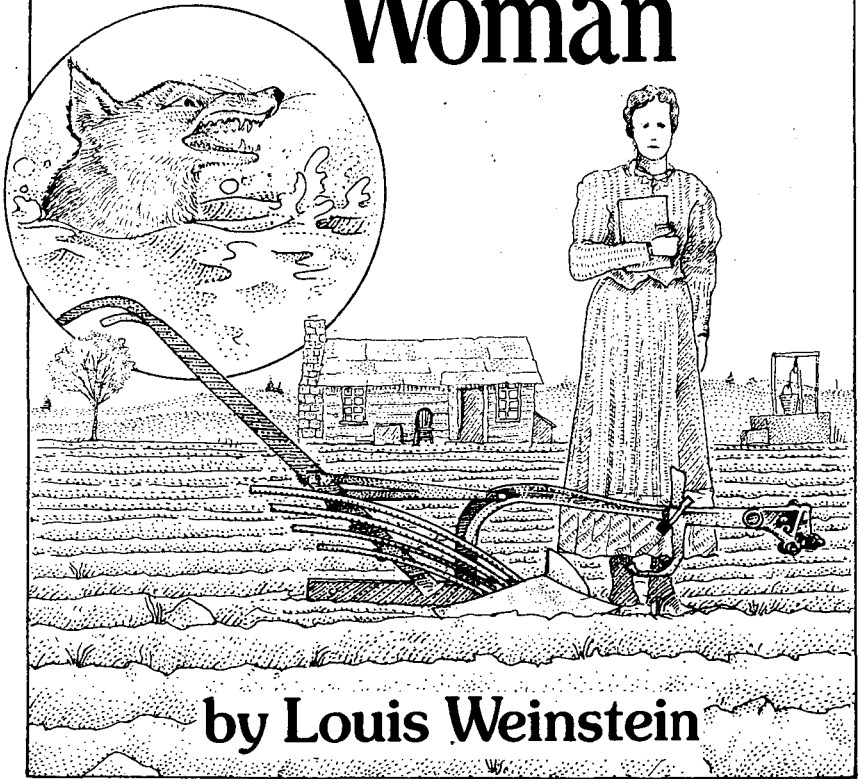
"And we drank the—"

"You old fool!" Emmie gasped, just before they toppled over.

"*You're senile!*"

FICTION

Pioneer Woman



by Louis Weinstein

April 13, 1803 Masontown, Ky. Morning.

Zeb works me like a horse only the horse has it better. Leastways the beast gets to rest in the barn with the cow come sundown whilst my work goes on forever. All day it is milking and chopping wood and fetching water and tending the fire and cooking and skinning animals and plowing and harrowing and planting and weeding and heaven knows what else. After dark it is sitting by the fireplace spinning or sewing till my fingers get stiff and my eyes burn so I can hardly see and all the time never a kind word out of Zeb or those two lummox sons of his. Then when it is time to fall into bed

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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bone weary and hurting all over Zeb is there waiting for me. Life is hard. Noah and Will are good for nothing except playing tricks on me. Yesterday it was stones in my shoes and today a snake only a poor harmless garter snake but the surprise of it enough to scare me into letting out a holler. Those boys would sooner skip a meal than think of giving me a hand with the chores. The minute Zeb's back is turned they go off hunting or swimming in the creek. They laugh at me when I tell them there's work needs doing. They tell me I am only a stepmother and they needn't pay me no mind. I tried telling this to Zeb but he made light of it. He says I am only aiming to get the boys in trouble they are good boys a man couldn't want finer sons they hunt good and shoot straight and he doesn't want to hear tales about them from a woman.

If I'd known what lay ahead with the three of them I'd never have married Zeb and come along with him to Kentucky. Yesterday he hitched me up to the plow. I asked him why he was doing that. I said pulling the plow was too hard work for a woman you have a horse for that. He laughed and said none of your mouth woman you'll do as I say what do you know about horses the horse is a little lame in one leg and I can't chance hurting the horse worse. I asked what about hurting me and he laughed again and said a horse is worth more than a woman I can always get another woman but I can't get another horse. I suppose he is right about that. He has buried three wives and still has the same horse.

That's all the regard Zeb has of me. I used to think Nathan was bad. Nathan was a shiftless no account and I can't say I grieved hard when the Indians scalped him but no one could be worse than Zeb. About the best thing Nathan did for me was not leave me with young ones. I was just turned fifteen and come to marrying age when ma died and pa ran off leaving me alone and without kin and no one to watch over me. That's how I came to marry Nathan.

Thinking on how I can get away from Zeb and the boys is much on my mind. I know I'm not the youngest woman in the world getting on to thirty but I'm not a dried up old prune either. There's nary a wrinkle to my face nor a gray hair to my head and I'm not the most ill-favored of women. I favor pa in many ways. I've heard men folk remark about my shape as I passed by and they thought I didn't hear and I recollect a few times I know I've started hearts beating faster. Pa was a fine figure of a man tall and straight and handsome as they come but otherwise there wasn't much to him.

Ma said he had no substance said I should keep an eye out for a man of substance when it came to marrying and also to keep a jump ahead when it came to men lots of things could happen. But I was unlucky and didn't get much chance to look around. Pa was given to drink and a gambler and a schemer who didn't mind bending the law a little. Ma said she was bewitched by his good looks and honey dripping tongue and married beneath her station. Ma said she came from Virginia plantation folks. She could read and write and figure and went to pains to teach me how and said to keep writing always no matter what it would keep the mind from drying up. That's why I do this writing of my life. She said to do it like I was writing a letter to her nothing fancy. Poor Ma allowed as how she made a mistake marrying Pa but there was no way out of the bargain. A fever took her but if she wasn't wore down from all the wearying work she might have got better.

I am doing this right after milking but I best not wait too long to hide this book away in my sewing box. Will and Noah will be back from hunting soon and I know they'll tattle to Zeb if they catch me writing and then it will go hard with me. Zeb is dead set against me writing. He thinks it is all hifalutin foolishness specially in a woman. I got this new book from Mr. Holbrook up at the general store yesterday and a new pen and ink. Mr. Holbrook wouldn't take payment. He said to consider it in the nature of a gift to a deserving woman from a good friend. Zeb doesn't know I got the book. He was off to the tavern drinking whisky and carrying on with the men soon as he got paid for the pelts he brought to Mr. Holbrook. Some days ago Zeb caught me writing and burned my old book and pen in the fire and spilled the ink out. Mr. Holbrook doesn't seem to think writing is foolishness in a woman. He smiled and gave his head a shake and said if I needed help he'd be glad to oblige and would like to come by and see what I write some time. I thanked him for his interest and said he was welcome to come by long as Zeb wasn't about. Mr. Holbrook is a little fat and growing bald but he is said to be very smart and rich. Preacher Catledge chanced to be in the store and kept watching me as I talked to Mr. Holbrook and got the book. Preacher Catledge appears to know when we are coming to the store. Most always he chances to be around when I am there.

April 17, 1803 Masontown.

Today I saw a mighty odd thing. In the morning I went to the

creek to fetch water. The creek is almost a quarter mile away. Some big fish were breaking the water a little ways upstream. They were jumping out after flies and hanging over the water. A duck was paddling around with a bunch of little ducks stringing behind. I watched for a little while thinking this would be just the place for Zeb to catch some nice fish as a change from all the game we eat. Then I saw something that surprised me. A fox came out of the grass and began to sneak out toward the duck. The water there near the bank wasn't deep at all. The fox hardly got his feet wet at first. Then it got a little deeper and first thing I knew he was in to half way up his legs. That was when he stopped moving forward. It looked like he was having trouble lifting his feet. All of a sudden he was floundering around. He sank in up to his shoulders and couldn't seem to raise his legs at all. He began barking and making funny sounds and trying to lift his head. He seemed to be stuck in the muddy bottom. He was struggling something fierce and the more he struggled the stucker he got and the further down he went. I didn't have all day to moon around watching so I carried the water pails back to the house. Zeb was still there and he asked me why it took so long. I told him I am a little lame in one leg and must have caught it from the horse.

On my second trip the fox was still there and in a bad way. About all I could see of him was the head. It was interesting to watch. I never saw the like of it before. He was struggling something fierce. I got a little sick to the stomach thinking it could happen to me or someone else unlucky enough to try to cross over there. I filled the pails and watched the fox's head go under. It was goodbye fox not that I felt sorry for him or will miss him. Foxes are a nuisance and could cause us a lot of trouble specially when Zeb gets around to getting us the chickens he keeps promising.

I suppose I ought to warn Zeb and the boys to stay away from that stretch of the creek. This was the first time I saw quicksand. It's as bad as it's reckoned to be.

April 20, 1803

Noah and Will are getting too rambunctious. Getting into bed last night I noticed it looked a little lumpy but I thought it was just the quilt bunched up. I found a dead raccoon but not before I sat on it and let out a scream thinking Lord knows what it was. The boys thought it was the funniest thing in the world. So did Zeb. I think maybe he knew the boys were up to the trick. He sat

up in bed when he heard me screaming. He was laughing so hard I thought he would choke himself to death. I picked up the raccoon and went to swinging it at the boys beating them around the head and shoulders with it. They tried to get me to stop saying I was hurting them it was just a joke we didn't mean no harm. Zeb chimed in you had better leave off and get to bed Nettie the boys was just having some fun. The boys finally skedaddled out of the house to get away from me. I didn't hear them come back in. I poured some whisky for myself out of the barrel without first asking Zeb who is stingy with the whisky, comes to me. The whisky settled my nerves and I dropped right off. I suppose that's why I didn't hear the boys come back in. Those boys are downright ornery. Some day they'll be sorry they treated me so bad. How I wish I could get away from this life with them.

April 21, 1803

Preacher Catledge rode around this afternoon on his horse. I was alone just after skinning a deer in the barn. He is a bony little man with a beard and piercing black eyes that look right into a body. I was a mess, all blood and grease. I was starting to work up the brains to soften the hide. He asked me why I didn't go to Sunday services. I told him I couldn't go without Zeb and Zeb was not a churchgoing man didn't know the sabbath from Tuesday. A shame Preacher Catledge said. You are a fine upstanding woman and it would be uplifting and give you great consolation to come close to the Lord. I know you have had great adversity in your life losing your first husband, scalped by the Indians. I said that was a great calamity but Nathan should not have cheated them. He said how did he cheat them. I said he was busier making whisky than farming. He had a still out in the woods about a mile from the house. He sold the Indians whisky. Preacher Catledge said that wasn't smart Indians and whisky do not mix. I said cheating and Indians do not mix worse. The bad whisky he sold them was mostly water. They came around after they found out and wanted to see him so he could make good. They were mad as a bear with a porcupine quill in the snout. I was afraid of them who knows what they might do to me so I had to tell them to look for Nathan out at the still. They wanted to know where the still was. They had tomahawks with them and I was so afraid of them I told them which way to go and they went out to the still. Nathan didn't come home. I went out to the still and found him there, scalped by the savages.

Preacher Catledge said I didn't know the details up till now. It was bread cast on the waters it was the will of God. I agreed it was the will of God. Preacher Catledge asked me do you read at all. I told him my mother taught me and she also taught me to write and do some figuring and I keep practicing the writing. He asked me how I did that. I said in a book I got from Mr. Holbrook. He is interested in my writing. I explained about Zeb throwing my other writing book away. Preacher Catledge said I am sure Cal is mighty interested. I am interested too would you consider it too forward if I asked to see what you write. I said I have nothing to hide. After I showed him he scratched his head and said you write tolerably well but my punctuation could stand improvement. He said what I wrote about the fox was interesting and to be careful about the quicksand. He told me I was a mighty interesting woman. Next he asked me if I had anything to read like the bible. I said there was none in this heathen house Zeb doesn't believe in the good book or any kind of learning specially for a woman. Preacher Catledge said that is too bad I will bring you a bible if you want. I said I always wanted a bible for myself and I would be thankful to accept his offer but I would have to keep it hid. He said what Zeb don't know won't harm anyone next time I come around I will bring you a bible and we can talk about it case there's something needs puzzling out. I told him that that will suit me fine Preacher Catledge. You are a good man and I appreciate your interest in my spiritual welfare. He told me it would not be soon cause he was riding out to Indiana.

When Preacher Catledge leaned close as he was showing me the mistakes in my punctuation taking the pen and writing in the punctuation right and looked at me with those burning eyes I was not so sure his mind was entirely on my spiritual welfare. But I don't suppose there's any harm in him. He is a good man and it gives me a good feeling to know someone is interested in me. It makes me think I am worthy good for something besides slaving for Zeb around this farm.

April 23, 1803

This morning I had another visitor, Mr. Holbrook said he was just passing by and left his wagon on the road that runs past our property. He was smoking a cigar. He thought he'd say hello and asked where Zeb was. I told him out tending his traps. He said he hadn't seen us for a while and was there anything wrong. I told

him no one was ailing and Zeb would be around before long to the store he is almost out of bullets and powder and has a heap of pelts to bring in. He asked if I'd be coming along with Zeb and said he hoped I would, it's always good to see you. I said it's good to see you, Mr. Holbrook, I mean come to your store and get to see some other people, it gets awful lonesome way out here with just menfolk. He said you best make it soon, I am leaving for Indiana in two weeks, opening a new store there. A nephew coming from Pennsylvania is going to take over for me here. I wished him well and said we would all miss him. We chatted some more. He asked me how my writing was coming along. I said I do it every chance I get, Mr. Holbrook. Preacher Catledge says I am doing splendid. He's teaching me about punctuation. Mr. Holbrook took the cigar out of his mouth and said Preacher Catledge should forget about my punctuation and stick to his preaching. He said keep the writing up, Nettie, you have the true pioneering spirit, always trying to better yourself, I like to see that in a woman. You don't mind if I call you Nettie? I said I don't mind. He said you can call me Cal, we know one another well enough for that. I said I don't rightly know what you mean by that talk about pioneering spirit, I just try to keep going. That was all the talk except for me telling him he best not linger too long, the boys would be back from hunting any minute hollering for their dinner and Lord knows what they'd tell Zeb if they found me idling my time away talking to a visitor, besides what would Zeb say and do with his bad temper and being a jealous man. Cal left me thinking there was something more he wanted to say but didn't get around to. Maybe he was afraid to say it straight out. Or maybe afraid Zeb would catch him there with me.

April 26, 1803

Two days ago the boys pranked me again. Noah is the worst. He's only fifteen but already bigger than Will. Will is seventeen. Noah puts Will up to mischief. Both are old enough to know better but with a father like Zeb what can a body expect? Zeb was already abed, snoring up a storm. The boys were hanging around, joking and wrestling. I was sewing a deerskin shirt for Noah. He grows right out of them. I noticed Will's shirt front bulging. I just knew he had something hidden there and was going to play one of his pranks.

At bedtime when I crawled under the covers I got another terrible

shock. Under my back I felt something cold and wet. I almost let out a scream but I controlled myself and only a small yelp came out. I didn't want those two rascals watching me from their bed up in the loft, whispering and simpering, to know they'd got a rise out of me. Zeb growled at me in his sleep to be still and gave me a poke with his elbow. I poked him right back and I shoved the dead frog, a monster for size, up in back of my pillow, pretending I was fluffing the pillow and everything was just natural.

Next day I got up early and hid the frog. I cooked up a nice stew of squirrel and rabbit with potatoes, onions and carrots and when it was ready I had a nice portion with johnnycake. For a change Zeb and the boys were out working the land, or hunting, I don't know what, I was just content not to have none of them around. After I got done eating I threw the dead frog into the kettle and let it cook up. Zeb and the boys came home at the same time and were hungry for supper. I dished them up man-size helpings. They ate their fill and I said you want some more, there's plenty in the kettle. Zeb didn't want any but the boys have no bottoms to their stomachs and said sure just like I figured. I filled their trenchers again. While they were eating I took the kettle and started to spoon out what was left into a big bowl for keeping. I held up the spoon and said what's this. On it was the frog. I made a puzzled face and asked how'd that get there. I didn't put it back in the pot. No one had an answer but the boys stopped eating and turned green in the face. Noah ran out of the house with Will right behind him. I heard them giving up their supper outside.

How did that frog get in the pot Zeb asked. He wasn't mad, just asking, the frog didn't bother him none. He just went on puffing his pipe. I said I don't rightly know. I guess it must have hopped into the house and jumped in the pot before I hung it up to cook, I was out in the barn softening up deerskin. Zeb answered serves them right for being so finicky, what harm's in a frog. The legs are mighty fine eating but the rest ain't much. You watch out, woman, no more frogs get in the cook pot unless it's just the legs. I told him I'd be extra careful just to keep him from getting all testy.

Anyhow it did my heart good to turn the joke on Noah and Will. Maybe it'll teach them a lesson not to make sport of me. Maybe they treated their mother that way but I am not their mother.

April 28, 1803

Last night I hinted to Zeb fish would be a welcome change from

all the game. Zeb said he'd think about it, some day maybe he'd have the time. Zeb will never admit I have any good ideas. His way has to be better. Then after a while he claims the idea was his like I never put words to it. The way he thinks, a woman is not supposed to have ideas of her own, leastways none worth the time of day. A woman is good for all the hard and dirty work and not much else except birthing children.

Today Zeb was up and out before me. When I went to fetch water there he was, with his fishing pole, downstream of me, hanging the pole out over the bank, which is a little steep there, but not catching anything.

I called over to him why don't you go up the creek and try, I can see the fish jumping out of the water there, there are so many of them, and real lunkers, too, just begging to be caught. He said I was just about to and yanked the pole out of the water. He said I noticed the same thing. He wasn't about to give me credit for the idea.

So he came down past me up the creek to where some kind of grass grows out of the water near the shore. That was where I saw the fox the other day. I didn't tell him about the quicksand. I figured he knew it was there, just like he brags he knows every inch of the ground for miles around. He wouldn't have paid me no mind. Anyway, how was I to know anything up that way could bother a big strong man like Zeb? He wasn't a spit small fox. Besides he wouldn't have stayed away just on my say so.

Anyhow, Zeb walked up that way and took off his shoes and waded in. He went out a little ways past where the fox went. Then he sort of tripped and started to fall backwards, as if maybe he tried to pull his foot out of the sticky mud and lost his balance. He let go of the pole and it kind of started to float away from him. He got himself straightened up and tried to turn around and get back to shore. He was looking a little scared. He started to struggle and reach for the pole. The more he struggled the deeper he went into the mud. Come and help me, Nettie, he yelled, throw me something to hang onto so I can pull myself out. I yelled back I'm acoming. But by the time I got as close to him as I could without getting in the same fix there was nothing I could do. He couldn't reach the pole to get it to me and I couldn't lay hands on it. There were no tree branches I could reach out to him, and no rope. There was just nothing.

It was too bad Zeb had to die that way, sinking in and screaming

and yelling until he was swallowed up. It was like magic, the way he plumb disappeared off the face of the earth.

I brought the water back to the house and went looking for the boys to tell them the sad news but they were nowhere around, gone off into the woods. Later when they showed up I had them go into Masontown and tell Cal and Preacher Catledge about the terrible tragedy. Preacher Catledge was away and not expected back before a couple of days. But Cal is an obliging sort and he closed his store for the day and came out and put his arms around me and spoke soft words, trying to console me in my grief. I told him I would miss him something awful when he went to Indiana, specially with Zeb gone and me a widow woman again and no man to help with the burden around the house, life was going to be hard. He said that can be mended, what are you fixing to do. I said stay here a while, I can't properly think straight now. Later on looking for another man appears to be the only thing left to me. Maybe in Indiana, I hear that's an up and coming place. He said up and going, for me. You don't have to look for another man. You know I'm moving on in a matter of a week. You can come along for the ride. I said it wouldn't be proper, not without Zeb read over. He said Preacher Catledge will take care of that in a day or two, when he gets back. I said he can marry us up, if that be fit and proper so soon after the tragedy. Cal said this is the frontier. We are pioneers. People die all the time and those left behind have to make the best of it. There ain't no time for amenities. But if you agree to come along with me we can get wed in Indiana, with a proper ceremony and all when we settle down there. I said that's very kind of you. I think maybe I just might come along with you. He answered there won't be room for the boys in my wagon, what with all the goods I'll be carrying. I said I wasn't thinking of taking the boys if I go. They have kinfolk on Zeb's side a few miles back down the road who'll be happy as a bird to get two fine strapping boys to work on the farm. He said so it's settled. I said it is not settled. I will have to sleep on it before I make such an important decision. Indiana is a long way off, and a lot of peculiar things can happen on the way even if I am just along for the ride.

He looked at me kind of funny but I looked him straight in the eye and he knew what I meant. He said well you sleep on it but let me know soon. Then he left.

Just because I am what he calls a pioneer woman doesn't mean I am going to let anyone get the advantage of me any more. After Nathan and Zeb I have learned my lesson.

I haven't told the boys about me and Indiana. If I decide to go they are going to get one big surprise. They are no real kin to me. Let them find someone else for their monkeyshines with dead frogs and raccoons. I'm a little leery of Noah. Scared of him. For a fifteen year old boy he has some strange ideas. I don't like the way he looks at me. A fifteen year old boy has no right to get notions about filling his father's shoes.

April 29, 1803

Cal is a mighty persistent. He came riding up early this morning. He asked if I'd made up my mind yet. I told him not yet, I was still apondering. He said well maybe this will put an end to your pondering. He handed me a letter and said it was a copy of what he'd be sending to a lawyer man named Corrigan who was looking after his affairs out at Cooper Junction in Indiana. That's where Cal is having a brand new building put up for his new store with nice living quarters in the back with a real kitchen sink and a pitcher pump. Cal said if I found the letter agreeable he would mail it to lawyer Corrigan right away. The letter said I, Nettie Sparks, was to be a full and equal partner in owning the business and the property, no strings attached.

When I was done reading I said that is very generous of you, it puts a different face on the matter. You can send the letter off. I will ride with you to Cooper Junction.

He smiled like a boy eating cherries and clapped his hands and said he thought that would win me around. You can keep the letter. Being as it is all set now, let us go and drink a little whisky to celebrate. I said I have no quarrel with that. We each had a drink. One was enough for me. I sent him on his way before the spirits started his blood stirring and his heart beating faster than was good for him. Besides, I had things needed doing.

April 30, 1803

Soon as he heard about Zeb, Preacher Catledge, fresh from his trip, today came riding out. He told me how sorry he was and asked me not to take Zeb's passing too hard. I said I was all right, Zeb was gone to his reward, I couldn't bring him back with tears and fussing, I would just have to keep going and make the best of everything. He said he knew I was a strong woman who knew how to cope with adversities. He said the Lord moves in mysterious ways and it was the will of the Lord to remove Zeb from the trials of this world. I said yes it was the will of the Lord and would it be

fit and proper for you to read over Zeb. He said it was the custom and a decent send off would be good for Zeb's eternal soul. Of course we can't bury him, the quicksand took care of that, but we can have a service and put up a marker, I happened to tote along with me some paint and a couple of boards. I asked what the other board was for and he said for a sign to warn people to stay clear of the quicksand, that was the neighborly thing to do.

So we gathered up the creek where Zeb was, me and the boys and Preacher Catledge, who took off his hat and got out his bible and read from it and ended with saying God rest your soul, amen. I kept wiping at my eyes because the words were so beautiful and solemn and the way he said them tore me up inside. The boys looked sad and also worried. Then Preacher Catledge got out the boards and painted on them. The warning sign was bigger than the marker for Zeb. All that had on it was nearby lies Zebulon Sparks born 1760 died 1803.

Afterwards I sent the boys off to work, the work doesn't end just because someone dies. Preacher Catledge went back to his horse and got out a bible from his saddlebag. He handed it to me and said this is the bible I promised. Read it every day and it will give you comfort and strength to overcome your troubles. I said thank you I will do that. He said I will be coming around often to see how your bible studies are coming and to improve your punctuation and writing and also to see that you are keeping up with everything because I am worried about you and I have my Christian duty to perform. I said I will appreciate your visits. He said don't be bashful about asking me for help, I am at your service for anything you want. Before he left he asked me what I planned to do. I told him I wasn't expecting to bide around Masontown very long, I was moving on in a week or so with someone who kindly offered me a free ride to Indiana. He was surprised at that and asked who I was going to Indiana with. When I told him it was Cal Holbrook his face fell. He asked just the two of you. I said I can't see anything wrong in that, I am just going along for the ride. I have to get away from those two rough boys of Zeb's before they put me in the grave. Preacher Catledge didn't look very happy and said it wouldn't look right for you to be going off with just Cal like that, it would be against the word of God. He ought to marry you first before you leave. I said I was the one wanted to wait till we got to Indiana and have a regular church wedding, if I could wait, he could wait. You don't have to worry about me, Preacher Catledge. I am not a

wicked woman. I am just going along for the ride. I can't put it any plainer than that. He tried to make me see what I was going to do was wrong, people would think it was sinful, but he saw my mind was made up. He got up on his horse and said I think the world of you and will be keeping an eye on you and will most likely see you on the road, I'm going out that way again.

He started to ride off then turned around and rode back. He said supposing Cal changes his mind when you get to Indiana and decides he doesn't want to marry you, what will you do then. I just smiled and answered I'd land on my feet like a cat, I would still be a partner in the business. I told him about the letter Cal sent off to lawyer Corrigan out in Cooper Junction making me a partner. Preacher Catledge said I guess you are like a cat. You are a remarkable woman. I know lawyer Corrigan and he has always been an honorable man. I hope Cal appreciates what a gem of a woman he is getting. I said Cal appreciates me all right, and I appreciate all his good qualities.

Preacher Catledge slapped his horse kind of hard and rode off. He looked as if he just bit into a green persimmon. I think I know what has him upset. I feel sorry for him. He is a good man.

May 7, 1803 Sundown. Indiana Bound. First day out.

Cal is expecting me to lie down alongside him in the wagon. I guess he doesn't think I meant it when I told him I was just going along for the ride and we would see what happened when we got to Indiana. But that's how men are. I have learned what ma meant when she said a woman has to keep a jump ahead of them. He's arguing with me back and forth. He sounds very peeved. I can't write more now.

May 8, 1803 Early morning.

I got up real early to write this. I will have to do it in a hurry before Cal gets up wanting breakfast. He is still asleep in the wagon. Yesterday was our first day on the road. Cal did most of the driving. Driving the heavy wagon is hard on the bumpy road. There are so many ruts and rocks and streams to cross. Cal was in good humor, singing and joking and telling me how much I will like Indiana. I rode on the seat beside him part of the time and sang along with him but every once in a while I got out and walked just to stretch my legs and get relief from the jolting and the jokes. At the uphill spots I got out and walked alongside. Keeping up was

no trouble. The wagon is loaded with barrels, cases, sacks of salt and sugar and beans, boxes, shovels, axes, froes, and other tools. Everything keeps sliding back and forth. Going up some of the hilly spots Cal had me push the wagon from the back while the horses pulled. None of the hills was too steep. Cal said the worst was yet to come, a few days farther on there were bad hills and we would have to tie a big heavy log to the back of the wagon to slow it on the down slope so the wagon would not roll down too fast and crash into the horses. Out of curiosity I took a look at the heavy rope in the back of the wagon that was for that purpose. The rope was under some froes lying loose. I didn't like the look of the rope. I thought of telling Cal the rope looked old, all frayed and worn and unraveling in spots and might give way because of getting bit into by the froe blades but then I thought I am only a woman and Cal knows what he is doing. So I decided not to. I suppose the rope is all right but I will be careful if Cal has me helping from behind the wagon.

We stopped for the night. We pulled into a level grassy spot just off the road. Cal said he would help me get a fire going to cook supper right after he hobbled the horses and set them out to grazing. I had the fire going before he finished with the horses. He praised me for that and without my asking went and gathered wood for the fire. I made a good supper of corn meal mush and ham and he said it was tasty, I was a fine cooker. He started singing like a lark. He moved some barrels in the wagon and spread blankets there to make a bed and then he lay down. I was sitting outside and getting ink and all ready to write down the day's events. He called out to me asking why I didn't come to bed, we needed our rest. I said I wasn't ready yet, I had things to do, like my writing. That can wait, he said, it's not important come to bed like a sensible woman. I said it wouldn't be right, remember our agreement. Besides, I have the curse. He said well, that is too bad but I thought maybe you would be more agreeable once we got on the way, I thought you understood that, it's not like you're a young girl dancing around the maypole, you've been married twice, what did you expect, a man and a woman alone on a long trip. Think about it a while and do the sensible thing, after the curse has passed. You can still come to bed here where it's warm and comfortable. Toward morning it's going to get nippy. I'll be here waiting.

He didn't say any more. I wrote a few lines but I was thinking hard and was very tired and stopped writing. My mind was all

foggy. I almost decided it would be easiest if I gave in and let him have it his way. But it is the truth that Cal does not make my heart beat faster. What I did was get my blankets off the wagon seat and roll myself up in them. I fell right asleep. Toward morning I slept a little cold. Cal must have been very tired himself. He was already snoring like guns going off when I went to sleep. I was glad he didn't come out of the wagon after me. I guess he slept cold too. He is probably used to that by now. I never gave Cal to understand I was hankering to be his foot warmer on this trip.

May 10, 1803

Cal doesn't have much to say to me any more and what he says I'd rather not hear. He is mad clear through and pushing very hard to get to Cooper Junction. No more singing and joking, just working at keeping the wagon rolling. The road is terrible. Cal makes me do all the driving now and all the bouncing has me stiff and hurting in the back. When the wagon gets stuck in a hole he makes me get out and push. He keeps saying as long as you are only along for the ride you will earn your keep, by golly, just like anyone else. He is almost as bad as Zeb. He has been sleeping in the wagon and I have been sleeping under the stars. Last night it rained and I was cold and wet and miserable and was almost tempted to get in the wagon with him but then I thought it was too late to start that business and I would not throw my pride away. Maybe I am a foolish woman. I do my writing in the morning before Cal gets up. During the day I hardly have time to breathe. Cal just got out of the wagon. He said I hope you got good and wet last night, if you did it is your own fault, it doesn't have to be that way.

May 11, 1803 Toward Indiana.

Preacher Catledge is following us like he said he would. Yesterday afternoon I was driving and Cal was walking behind the wagon. I saw a rut up ahead and reined in the horses and turned my head to look behind me around the side of the wagon. I was meaning to call Cal and let him know about the rut. I saw a horseman coming over a rise back off in the distance. He was keeping off the road. From the way he sat the horse I could tell it was Preacher Catledge. I didn't tell Cal but felt a lot better being as Preacher Catledge was close by seeing to it no harm came to me. Cal is mean as a wildcat. I am afraid he is going to put his fists to me or worse. I'm almost hoping now he will tell me to get down

off the wagon and start walking and find my own way to Indiana. I don't reckon he will do that. He needs me along to help with the wagon once we get to the bad stretches he keeps talking about. So far we have managed to keep the wagon going but I can see the horses are starting to wear down.

May 12, 1803

The hills are getting steeper now. Cal had to stop the wagon at the top of one hill and put the brake on so's it wouldn't roll back down. Then he ordered me to get an ax and chop down a tree. I said it was too hard for me, I am only a poor feeble woman, my strength is failing, why don't you chop the tree down. He said none of your argument, woman, my back is ailing and I can't swing the ax. What was I to do? He picked out the tree he wanted. It was a big yellow pine. It took me a long time to do the chopping. I kept getting winded and had to stop to catch my breath. He kept grumbling I was too slow, we were losing valuable time. He took the rope and measured off the width of the road on it and marked off a little less than that length on the tree. Then I had to chop through the trunk again. The idea was that the log that was left would not be as wide as the road and wouldn't get tangled up in the trees and bushes when the log was dragged behind the wagon and make it too hard for the horses to pull. When I got done trimming off the branches Cal helped me haul the log onto the road. I was tuckered out when we finished.

Cal said he'd drive and told me to get behind the wagon and help hold it back when it started down the hill. He then tied one end of the rope around the middle of the log and the other end to the back axle. He wanted the log to drag about three or four feet behind the wagon and slow it down.

Cal climbed into the driver's seat and I kind of stayed off to the side at the rear of the wagon. He saw where I was standing and yelled at me, saying I was a cowardly, useless woman, it wouldn't do no good to stay where I was, I wouldn't get hurt, he'd done this a hundred times. So I had to grab hold of the rope and pull might and main and help hold the wagon back. I was more afraid of him than I was of what could happen to me, that's why I did what he said.

He put the brake on as the wagon started down the hill and I pulled on the rope with my heart in my mouth expecting the log to smash into me. But it didn't. It just kept bumping along digging

into the dirt. We made it to the bottom of the hill and Cal stopped the wagon and came back to me and said whew, that was not too bad, but just you wait till day after tomorrow, that will be a bear. Leastways now you know what to do. I said I know exactly what to do, you won't have to worry about that any more. He said now let's get the log off the road. We did that and he threw the rope into the back of the wagon. It was coiled in with a bunch of froes. I was about to say something about the sharp edges of the froes cutting into the rope but I didn't get a chance. He must have guessed what I was about to say. He said don't you worry your pretty little head about the rope, you just tend to the driving. I was glad I didn't say anything. He'd blame me if anything bad happened with the rope. I was so bushed I could hardly sit up. He gets worse every day. I decided I would rearrange the froes better later. Before I giddapped the horses I had myself a look back up the road and could see Preacher Catledge not far off in a clump of trees watching from horseback. I didn't tell Cal. I don't think Cal saw Preacher Catledge.

May 14, 1803

I was driving and Cal was walking beside the right side of the wagon when Preacher Catledge came riding up alongside me. I said nice and loud we've got company and softer it's mighty good to see you. Preacher Catledge said even softer so Cal couldn't hear that snake is not treating you right, Nettie. I've been watching. I said very softly he is rottener than Zeb, a changed man since I've been sleeping outdoors under the stars. Preacher Catledge asked all the time. I said since the first night. Preacher Catledge said I knew you were a woman of character. Stick it out, Nettie, it is only a few more days to Indiana, when you get there you will be all right. You have an iron-clad agreement with him on the store, whether he likes it or not he can't wiggle out. Lawyer Corrigan will see you get your due. I said I pray for that every night.

Just then Cal came crossing over to our side of the wagon and said what in tarnation is going on here, all this whispering back and forth, stick to your preaching, preacher man, and don't bother the woman while she's driving, you've already poisoned her mind enough with your preaching at her. Preacher Catledge said nice and easy it is just conversation as I am passing by. Cal said get your horse moving and stay away from the wagon and be on your way wherever you're going. Preacher Catledge said it's a free road

and a free country, I don't mean to hurry my horse.

Cal came around the wagon and took up his rifle. Preacher Catledge was wearing a pistol himself and had his rifle slung handy on his horse but he didn't make a move for either. For a little bit the two men stared at each other. I held my breath. Then Cal raised his rifle and Preacher Catledge kicked his horse and started to trot ahead down the road. Cal said to me don't you have any truck with him or the both of you are liable not to make it to Indiana. I thought it best not to say anything but I was thinking that was no way to talk to a preacher man. With Cal it is best to bide one's time. I will find a way to be shed of him, store or no store.

May 16, 1803

I'm catching up after the terrible happenings yesterday. I started driving in the morning and we came to this long hill with no end that got steeper the further up we went. I can't count how many times I had to get out and push. Cal treats me like one of the horses. They were so tired they could barely crawl along. Once in a while I looked back and there was Preacher Catledge coming along behind us, a good ways back. He must have waited in the woods somewhere till we went by and then followed behind us. We made it to the top of the hill and Cal put on the brake. I took a look down from the hilltop and got scared. The way down was steeper than a pitched roof. Cal said get the ax, woman, you've got some tree felling to do and make it a good thick one. I did as he said and Cal measured off just like the other day and I did some extra chopping and we huffed and puffed and dragged the log onto the road and Cal took the rope and tied the log to the back axle. I didn't like the look of the rope after all the rubbing against the froe blades but there was no use trying to tell Cal anything so I just stood watching him work. Cal kept the brake on as the wagon started down the hill. Cal couldn't see me and I decided to stay off to the side and just hang onto the back of the wagon. I hoped it would go all right. When the wagon started to slide down the hill without the wheels turning I let go of it and jumped way to the side so I'd be clear of the log. The rope broke and the wagon took off and skidded down the hill and caught up to the horses and the horses began to go to the side and the wagon began to shake and rattle. Cal stood up and let out a holler. I don't know whether he jumped or fell off the wagon as it started to twist sideways and turn over on its side. That stopped the horses. They weren't hurt,

just skittish. Cal ended up in the ditch alongside the road. He was dead when I got to him, his head all caved in where it hit against a rock. Preacher Catledge saw what happened and came galloping up. I said Cal is dead, it was a terrible accident. Preacher Catledge said I know it was a terrible accident, I saw the rope break. Cal is as dead as he is ever going to be, rest his soul. Lucky for you you had the presence of mind to hop out of the way. I said I was afraid something like that might happen, the rope was no good but Cal wouldn't listen. Preacher Catledge said don't you go blaming yourself, it was the will of the Lord. I asked what am I going to do now. He said go on to Indiana, you have come too far to turn back. Indiana is not far now and from here on in the going is easier. Deliver the wagon and the goods to lawyer Corrigan. I said the same idea has crossed my mind. Preacher Catledge said we will have to give Cal a Christian burial. I said it was the least we could do. So we took shovels and dug a hole and Preacher Catledge prized a slat off a case from out of the wagon and made a marker and borrowed my ink to write on the slat. Preacher Catledge then read over Cal. It was short and sweet. Just as he was finishing his amens two men happened by with a train of pack mules and I spoke to them politely and smiled some and they kindly helped get the wagon upright. I gave them whisky for their trouble. Preacher Catledge and I drank some whisky ourselves and I drove the wagon down to the bottom of the hill. We camped there for the night. I fixed a good supper and afterward said I am going to sleep in the wagon, I am tired of sleeping under the stars which I did as you know because I only came along for the ride. Preacher Catledge, being a man of God, said so be it, you have your own integrity, Nettie, and he went to sleep alone under the stars, which he is used to anyhow.

May 18, 1803 Evening.

After breakfast Preacher Catledge asked to read my book so he could see how my punctuation and writing is going. I said of course you can, my life is an open book, I have nothing to be ashamed of. When he finished he sat a minute drinking his coffee and said Nettie, you are an amazing woman, a man would have to travel far to find your equal. I said that is very flattering, how is my writing coming. He said you do just fine, you express yourself well, your writing tells a lot about you. It was high time to get the wagon going and we didn't talk any more just then. Preacher Catledge.

doesn't seem to be in any great hurry to get to Indiana. Later as he rode a ways alongside me he said Nettie, you don't have much luck with your men. I said that is a fact now that you mention it, I have had a lot of bad luck with my men so far but I am hoping it will get better. He said I am sure it will and rode off up ahead and didn't get back until late afternoon. He brought back rabbits to fix for supper so I suppose he was off hunting.

We stopped for the night not far from the Ohio River. Indiana is on the other side.

May 19, 1803 Evening.

Indiana is beautiful. We crossed the river today on a ferry that was a big flat barge with a sail. Men with big long poles helped get the ferry across. I paid the toll with money I took off Cal before we buried him. I also took his watch, and a nice gold ring with a big stone. I think it is a sapphire.

May 20, 1803 Evening.

The driving is easier. The way is pretty flat, hardly any hills worth the mention. Preacher Catledge said we are almost there. He is not talking much these days. He spends a lot of time reading his bible. He even reads when he is riding alongside the wagon. I haven't been reading the bible. I am on pins and needles waiting to get to Cooper Junction. Most of the day Preacher Catledge rides up ahead going hunting. I am getting tired of eating rabbit.

May 24, 1803 Evening.

The days go along so much alike I hardly have anything interesting to write about. I am very anxious to get to Cooper Junction. Preacher Catledge says that will be tomorrow. I wonder what it will be like to live in a house with real wood floors and a sink inside with a pitcher pump.

May 26, 1803 Cooper Junction.

I am catching up on my writing now. For once I don't have to be in a hurry.

As we got near Cooper Junction yesterday we passed many farms. The wheat and corn were already coming up. We saw cows and pigs. Cooper Junction is where two main roads meet. In the town many buildings are spread out on both sides of both roads. The first building we saw was a church. Preacher Catledge's eyes kept

turning to the church as we passed by. Cooper Junction is a big town with a blacksmith shop, two taverns, a hotel, a livery shop and many other businesses, even a barber shop. We got there around noon. A big long building had a sign Holbrook's General Store. Behind it was a big grassy field. Wagons were parked outside the building and I caught sight of women. I wanted to stop the wagon to find out what was going on but Preacher Catledge said drive on, Nettie, your business is with lawyer Corrigan. We came to a big blue-painted house. Preacher Catledge said here we are. Sure enough a gold painted sign in the window said Patrick Corrigan, attorney. I parked the wagon and got down. I had the letter handy in my pocket. Preacher Catledge didn't get off his horse and started to ride back the way we came. I said where are you going and he answered he had business at the church, the reverend there is moving to Illinois and I am taking over there as regular preacher. I said don't leave me now, I am counting on you, I am a woman and not used to talking to lawyers. He said you don't need any kind of help from me, you are a smart, resourceful, determined woman and know how to get along. I said I am feeling weak in the knees now. You have been a good friend to me, don't spoil it now, didn't we come all the way from Kentucky together, your business at the church can wait a few minutes. I could tell he wasn't smoking hot to come in with me but I couldn't imagine why. I said please stay with me, I will be grateful to you till my dying day. Finally he said well, all right, you are a hard woman to refuse a favor but you had best speak for yourself.

I knocked on the front door and a tall man with carrot color hair and bright blue eyes answered the knock and stood there for a time studying me. He was a fine figure of a man in a dark blue suit and a tie and a mustache that matched his hair but no beard. He smelled nice, like bay rum. I figured him to be about forty. He said Preacher Catledge what a surprise we weren't expecting you for another two weeks. Preacher Catledge said because of unusual circumstances I decided to come a little ahead of time. This lady has some business with you. Lawyer Corrigan raised his eyebrows and looked me over some more. I think he liked what he saw.

Lawyer Corrigan said what is your business, mam. He had a nice deep voice. It was like music to me. I didn't want lawyer Corrigan to get the idea I was a stale flower with no life to it so I spoke right up. I said first off I have a wagonload of goods to be delivered. Lawyer Corrigan said what kind of goods, I am not ex-

pecting any goods. I said it's a long story. He said in that case step inside and tell me about it, it will be my pleasure to listen.

Inside the office had a big flattop desk. He told Preacher Catledge to take a seat and then took my arm and helped me to a chair to one side of the desk. He squeezed my arm when he helped me to the chair and my heart started to beat fast and I didn't flinch away. I didn't mind the liberty. He was just being a gentleman. He sat down and said now tell me your story.

I said the goods are for Mr. Holbrook's new store. I rode with him from Masontown. Lawyer Corrigan said where is Mr. Holbrook. I said he is dead. Preacher Catledge spoke up Cal is now walking with his ancestors. The wagon ran away coming down a hill and turned over. Cal fell off and smashed his skull against a rock, I saw the whole thing. I said it was an accident. Lawyer Corrigan said my God that was terrible, one of our finest citizens, but how do you fit in, mam, what is your name. I said my name is Nettie and I was coming along with Mr. Holbrook because we had plans together, I was to help him in the store, be his partner, and maybe more. I handed him the letter and said this will explain everything. Lawyer Corrigan took and read the letter. I could see his face changing expressions. He put the letter down and shook his head. I said what is wrong. He said I gather Cal intended to marry you but I never got this letter, this is all news to me. I said Cal sent it, we were fixing to get married here in Cooper Junction. But I don't want you to get any wrong ideas, I was just traveling with him.

Lawyer Corrigan just shook his head and said he never got the letter, maybe Indians ambushed the post rider or maybe it got sent to the wrong place by mistake, a lot of things could have happened to it. Preacher Catledge said including it never got sent. Lawyer Corrigan said that too is an unhappy possibility. Preacher Catledge said the only sent is skunk. I said what about the copy, that ought to be just as good. Lawyer Corrigan said I am afraid it is not signed, it is not a legal document, just a piece of paper. I said you are telling me the store is not mine being as Cal is now dead, I came all this way for nothing. He said my dear lady Cal left a will, he had me draw it up last time he was here. The store goes to his nephew. I said his nephew is in Masontown running the store there. He said this is another nephew who just got in from Philadelphia yesterday and opened the store today. I said that Cal Holbrook was a mean scoundrel who tricked me, may his soul rot in hell. Preacher

Catledge said amen and lawyer Corrigan said that appears to be the way of it. I said and now I am here in this town where I don't know a soul, a poor widow woman without a man of my own, my poor Zeb fresh dead, and I am left without a roof over my head and nowhere to turn. Preacher Catledge said have faith, God will provide. The tears came naturally and I began to wipe at my eyes with my sleeve.

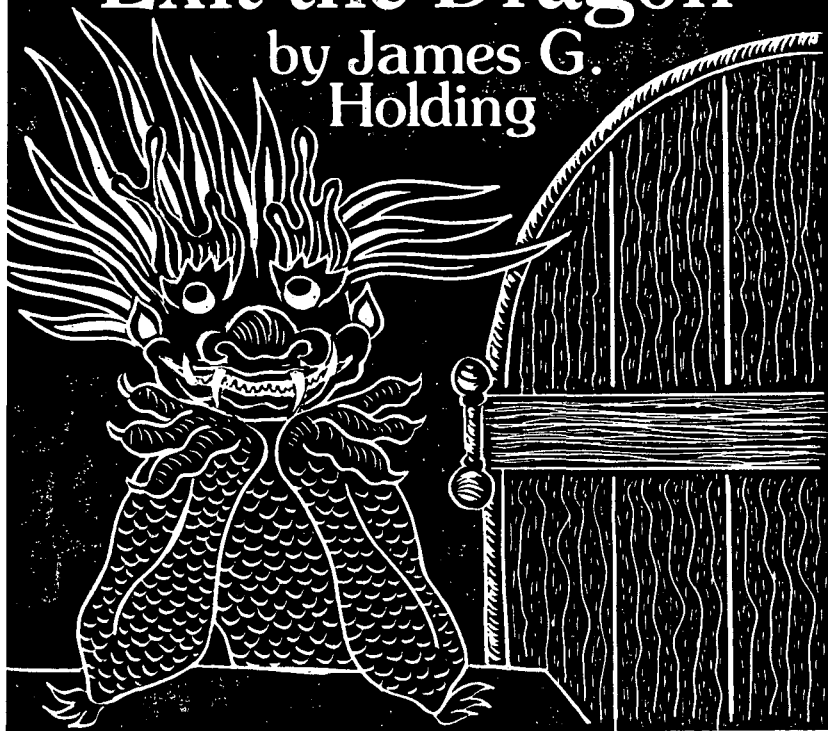
Lawyer Corrigan said it is never hopeless my dear. He put his arm around me and looked me in the eye and said you are welcome to stay here tonight, I have plenty of room in this big house. My heart was beating fast. I said that would be most kind of you. All my things are in the wagon outside. He said go get your things and I will arrange to take care of the wagon and the horses. I have an even better idea. The Indian girl ran off today to go back to her people, and I need a housekeeper. You can be my housekeeper, at least till you get your feet on the ground. Preacher Catledge said her feet are always on the ground. You don't need me, Nettie. I'll be on about my business now. I said thank you, Preacher Catledge, I won't forget you. I'm hoping we will still be friends and I will be seeing you again real soon. Preacher Catledge said I have an idea I will be seeing the both of you in church. He ran out in a hurry. He seemed to be much relieved. I think it was because he knew I was well taken care of.

I'm tired from all this writing now. I am in the kitchen. It has a real wood floor and a sink and a pitcher pump. There are real store bought candles. Patrick set me up in a nice room of my own and I cooked him a specially good meal and he ate with good appetite. After I took a bath we sat and talked for a long time.

I know I am going to like Cooper Junction. Tomorrow Patrick and I are going to see about getting some new clothes for me.

Exit the Dragon

by James G.
Holding



Alex was a dragon. Far below the mountain, he lay hugely in his treasure cave. The soft light of the thousand viridescent fungi that clung to the rocky walls and ceiling bathed his golden bulk and pricked gleaming high-lights on scale and claw and wingtip.

Illustration by Joanna Roy

He yawned hugely and stretched. Snakelike ripples coursed down his long body. He smiled a slow, saurian smile and cocked a lazy eye at the vaults that surrounded him. Smugly he reflected on the wealth that lay behind the many thick oak and iron doors: gold and jewels and what all else

even he did not know. All his. His to guard. His to protect. His to have.

Footsteps echoed hollowly against the walls of the narrow, rocky passage that led to his crypt. Interested, the dragon swiveled his mammoth head slowly, ears alert, eyes focused on the entrance. An interloper, obviously, he thought, perhaps a thief bent on mischief, perhaps a very early lunch.

The sound of the footsteps came closer. They approached the entrance. Alex shook his head and sighed sadly. Neither thief nor lunch, he decided. It was a customer.

The crusted walls of the cave receded, turned to mist, and disappeared. Alex was himself, not a dragon, just Alex, sitting at his desk at the entrance to the bank's safety deposit vault.

With long-practiced movements, he shifted the paper-back book from the top of his desk to the bottom drawer. His hand and his eyes lingered there on other books like the one he was depositing. Fantasy books all, there were hundreds more like them in his shabby little apartment. In the few rare periods when he wasn't reading, daydreaming, or actively working, he freely and honestly admitted to himself that they were the most important things in his life.

Lately it had been dragons. There were lots of great stories about dragons. Before that, there had been wizards and thieves and elf warriors and barbarian swordsmen and all the other archetypes that made the fantasy genre what it was. Alex liked dragons best. The guardian of a hoard of generally ill-gotten wealth, a dragon's life seemed to parallel his job. He slid the drawer closed. Whoever was coming was close, and Alex didn't recognize the sound of the steps. (He often amazed his regular customers by having the proper vault access signature card ready for them before they reached his door.)

It might be a new customer, someone wanting to rent a box. He scanned his work area to be sure everything was ready. His desk, now bookless, was neat. The file of cards that boxholders signed to enter the vault sat square to the time clock. Brochures on safe deposit services sat in a near-military pile at the edge of the desk. Inside the desk, rental contracts, signature cards, and other necessary forms waited in their proper places. Also in the desk were keys for new customers and lists of who owned which box and lists of which boxes were still available. Finally, and most important, Alex's master key

nested safely alone in the top drawer.

Ready for anything, Alex shot a fast glance at the door. He took one of the cards from the file at random and was busily engaged in looking busy as a somber-looking young man stepped into the vault area.

Smiling, Alex stood. "May I help you, sir?" he asked.

The stranger approached the desk. His face was cold and hard.

"I'm Hoskins. From Personnel," he announced. He sat down and began to speak.

Ten minutes later, Alex listened to the sound of Hoskins' footsteps receding down the hallway. He felt like crying.

Hoskins had been almost brutal. He had described the position of the bank and the bank holding company that owned it. He had told Alex how misguided loan policies and marketing strategies implemented by the recently-replaced senior management team had resulted in massive write-offs to loan loss reserves; this in turn made it necessary for the bank to "reorganize" to regain its lost market share, its position in the financial community, and its profitability.

The reorganization called for the elimination of Alex's job—and Alex—as a streamlining and cost-cutting measure.

Naturally, the bank would give Alex an excellent recommendation for future employment. The bank would also give him two weeks' termination pay. Until he found new employment, he would of course be eligible to receive unemployment compensation based on his past salary. Finally, Hoskins told Alex that his official termination date would be at the close of that day's business.

Then Hoskins had dropped a pile of government-mandated insurance forms on Alex's desk and had walked out of Alex's life.

Stunned, crushed, insulted, hurt, and humiliated, Alex sat and tried to think. He didn't really succeed.

One fact roared through his head again and again: he'd just listened to the death knell of his job, his glorious job that allowed him to read and to dream almost as he wished, and he'd done absolutely nothing. He'd just sat there and taken the news with a rather stupid look on his face.

A dragon would have reacted at once, rending the smarmy little lickspittle with fang and claw, slavering acid into the gory wounds as he inflicted them. A wizard would have blasted Hoskins into an eternity of agony with a lambent blast from an ebony wand. A

barbarian would have drawn his broadsword and cloven the little twerp from neck joint to ribs and then spat on the pieces as they fell.

But Alex had done nothing. He wasn't a dragon, nor a wizard, nor a hero, nor any of the other characters that filled his books. He was just an average jerk, soon to be just an average jerk without a job. And he'd never find another job like this one.

He sighed. It almost turned into a sob at its end, but he caught himself. Even an average jerk has his pride.

From habit, he opened his desk drawer and looked at his books. He left them where they were. He'd be reading want ads in the future, not fantasy.

He'd lost his damn job! Twelve years spent minding other people's valuables had just gone down the tubes and he had no idea what to do next.

A dry cough and the smart rapping of a cane tip on the marble floor took away any option he might have had. He looked up to see Mrs. Simpson, his least favorite customer. As always, she wore a look of general disapproval. He stifled a groan just as he'd stifled his sob.

The richest woman in town and the owner of one of the largest and most valuable stamp

collections in the state, Mrs. Simpson was the last customer Alex wanted to deal with right then.

He'd rather have had Hoskins back. He looked up at her bleakly. She glared back.

For the millionth time since he'd first met her, he thought she would be a perfect crone. He could see her as a hero's nemesis, a witch, or some nubile princess's aged and evil nurse, or perhaps a great, age-bent dowager empress steeped in vile magic and given to spouting maledictions and curses.

As she always did on Mondays, she barked, "Today, I'll take Europe." He had no doubt she could do just that. Alone.

Years of habit pasted a false smile on Alex's face. He riffled the signature cards for the one that would give her access to her European stamp albums, found it, and waited while she signed it. Then he slid it into the time clock, which chunked solidly.

The old woman tossed the key to her vault onto his desk with the air of a troll queen bestowing a gift. Alex picked it up and took the master key to the vaults from his desk drawer. Half in a brown study, he looked at the two keys he held. He snorted.

At least this would be the last time he would break the rules

for the old woman. Bank policy strictly forbade employees from ever handling patrons' keys; Alex handled Mrs. Simpson's keys every time she came in to work on her collections, practically daily.

Once, long ago, Alex told Mrs. Simpson about the policy and tried to make her comply. Admittedly, she was too short to reach the top rank of boxes where her stamp collections were housed, but the bank supplied a stool for just such occasions. Rules, he had said, are rules.

For his pains, Alex had received a tirade of such elemental ferocity it left him shaken and shaking. It also left him in full knowledge of the fact that God and Mrs. Simpson agreed that handling keys and carrying boxes were jobs for servants. Alex was a servant.

Since that day, he'd preferred to risk official wrath than Mrs. Simpson's.

Another dry cough and a second series of cane taps brought him back to reality once more.

"What are you carrying on about?" she demanded.

He looked at her. In his mind's eye giant golden jaws, their fangs dripping poison, clamped themselves around the old woman's shriveled torso.

Twelve years of subservience, however, kept him polite.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Simpson." His words came as if from under water. "There was a man here just now. Hoskins. He fired me." He felt foolish talking about it. His words trailed off.

She harrumphed. "Fired? You? Well." She stabbed him with eyes as sharp as knives. "For cause? Stealing? Doing your job badly?"

He shook his head. "Reorganization." He hated the sound of the word. "They just don't need me."

She sniffed. "Well. Fired or not, I still want my stamps. As long as you're here, you're an employee." Her eyes dared him to contradict her. "Correct?"

Alex sighed and turned away. She was correct.

He crossed the vault floor to box 643. As he'd done five thousand times, he inserted first his master key and then Mrs. Simpson's key in the double lock. Turning both keys at once, he swung the door open. Leaving the two keys in their holes, he slid the sheet metal inner box, heavy from the weight of many large stamp albums, from its resting place. He set the box on the floor, straightened, and relocked the vault, again twisting the two keys together.

His eyes slid to his left. Two doors away, Mrs. Simpson's collection of American stamps rested inside box 645. Between

them was number 644, his vault. He smiled wryly.

He hadn't needed the vault; he kept very little in it. Years ago, when Mrs. Simpson first rented the two boxes to hold her collection, box 644 had been taken. The rich widow had raised a holy outcry at not being able to rent two contiguous boxes. Later, the original owner of 644 died, and Alex had rented the box himself out of spite. He had even used a false name to rent the box, Thomas Hewett Edward Finger.

He sighed again; a small, crude joke for a small spite, a petty blow against his lot.

Then the idea hit him, a flash, a revelation that swooped down on him like a dragon stooping to seize a sheep. He could rob Mrs. Simpson! He could rob the bank! Stunned, he stood immobile, staring at box 644 and the words from his books sang in his brain.

Plunder!

Rapine! Revenge!

A smile of pure joy replaced the habit-bred imitation he'd worn seconds before.

Alex glanced at Mrs. Simpson guiltily, then bent to retrieve the metal box from the floor. Meekly, he followed her toward the small private room where the old woman worked on her collections. As he walked, he watched happily as ghostly

talons scored and raked her back from crown to heels.

With Mrs. Simpson safely ensconced with her stamps, Alex hurried to his desk. Grinning, he sat and hammered out the details of his plan.

Mrs. Simpson would finish her work just before Alex was due to take his lunch break. As usual, he would carry the metal box that held the albums from the cubicle to the vault. This time, though, he would palm Mrs. Simpson's key, the one for box 643, and replace it with the key to his own box, 644. Then he would open his box rather than hers and place the albums in it.

It was risky, but the boxes were right next to each other and putting the stamps away was routine. If he did it right, she would never suspect a thing.

Sooner or later, someone would probably figure out what he'd done, but by that time, he would be far from fear of retribution, the purloined stamps sold and long gone. Rage would drive Mrs. Simpson berserk when she discovered her treasured stamps were missing. Alex smiled. She would tear the bank apart. From the lowest levels to the highest, heads would roll and blood would flow. She had the temper and the guts and the clout to do it. She would sue the bank for an astronomic amount.

The publicity and the fallout would ruin more than one career. Let them reorganize their way out of that one.

It was a pretty picture, but he couldn't let himself day-dream at this point.

What else was there to do? He looked around. He would have to remove the inner box from his own or, rather, Mr. Finger's box so he could fit Mrs. Simpson's into it when the time came. Quickly, he crossed to number 644 and pulled out the inner box. He hid it in the knee-hole under his desk.

There had to be more. Escape. How could he get the stolen stamps out of the bank? There were guards in the lobby and employees everywhere. Hurrying, he deserted his post to run to a nearby storage closet where he found the largish cardboard box he needed. At his desk, he took his library of fantasy books from its drawer and put them in the box. He added the pitifully few documents and mementoes from the metal box under his desk and topped off the lot with the brown bag that held his lunch. Once Mrs. Simpson left, it would only take a moment to reopen his vault, transfer the stamp albums to the cardboard box, and cover them with the rest of his stuff. If anyone noticed him, he was only a terminated employee

cleaning out his desk.

He took a deep breath, looked around, and decided he was ready. Now, all he had to do was wait.

It wasn't easy. He had nothing to do but think. He tried to read his current book, a good one by Zelazny about evolution from humanity to dragonhood. He gave up the attempt after two sentences.

So he sat and fidgeted and reviewed his plan.

It all hinged on how well he palmed Mrs. Simpson's key. He took his own box key and a second from his ring and practiced switching them one-handed. He was no magician, but he got pretty good at it.

The minutes dragged by, turned into hours slowly. The keys became slippery with perspiration. He stopped reluctantly and put them away.

At last, he heard the scrape of chair legs inside the customer's cubicle. As the door opened, he realized that he'd been staring at it for a long time.

Mrs. Simpson stuck her head out. "I'm ready," she called. "You can put my stamps away now."

He went to the cubicle. Inside, he picked up the box with the albums in it and followed Mrs. Simpson back to the desk; there he retrieved his master

key, and she presented him one last time with the key to box 643.

Burdened, alone, he moved from the desk to complete the theft. He noted with pride that his breathing was steady, his nerves calm. A real dragon could do no better. He heard hosts of scaled heroes cheering. Unseen, he switched his key for hers just before he got to the ranks of vaults in the wall.

He set the box on the floor under his vault. Straightening, he inserted the master in its lock. He raised his box key to its proper place, held it ready, and knew he couldn't do it.

Transfixed, he stood with the tip of the key almost touching the lock. He couldn't do it, and he knew why. It wasn't the bank. It wasn't the old woman. He owed them nothing. It was himself.

For the second time that morning he realized he was a jerk. Only a jerk would turn his back on an easy chance to steal something worth tens of thousands of dollars, but, again, he repeated to himself, even a jerk has his pride. He was no dragon, no thief, and he didn't want to be. He was an average jerk and that was just fine with him.

He shot a look over his shoulder at Mrs. Simpson. She was staring at him with the bright eyes of a bird of prey.

"What is it?" she demanded.

A smile of mixed triumph and sheepishness moved across his face. "Wrong box, Mrs. Simpson. Sorry. Losing the job must have me rattled."

Re-palming the keys, he shifted position to stand in front of the proper vault. For the final time, he slid Mrs. Simpson's stamp collection into its resting place, closed the door, and turned away.

It was over. He felt good. There was a spring in his step as he returned to Mrs. Simpson. He grinned like a boy as he gave her the key.

"I guess this is goodbye, Mrs. Simpson," he said. "I won't be around any more."

She coughed the dry cough he knew so well. She was tentative, Alex thought, maybe even unsure of herself.

"Yes," she rasped. "You won't be here. I suppose you have another job lined up?" He shook his head.

"In that case, would you consider taking a job with me? We will be opening my new art gallery next week and we need to hire a night watchman. In the time I've known you, I've found you to be an excellent employee, dedicated, helpful, and civil—even to crotchety old ladies. The pay won't be much, and you won't have much contact with other employees, but

with a job like this one, you're rather used to that.

"Oh, yes, you'll also have time to spend on," she gestured toward the book-filled box on his desk, "other pursuits."

"Well, Alex, what do you say?"

She smiled and Alex couldn't say which surprised him more, the offer or the way the smile changed her face from crone to fairy godmother.

Stunned for the second time that morning, Alex accepted with a confused welter of thanks that the old woman waved away. He would report for work next week.

Dazed but smiling, he watched Mrs. Simpson leave the vault. He sat down at his desk and his shoe clunked against the metal box still hidden beneath it. He checked his watch. He had five minutes to get it back into vault 644 before June, the receptionist, came in to relieve him for his lunch break.

He pulled the box out from under his desk. Lunch, he thought, and his eyes caught the paper bag still sitting on top of his stack of books. Lunch?

He grabbed the bag and upended it. A baloney sandwich with mayo, two oranges, chips, a hardboiled egg, a container of

yogurt and, best of all, a largish wedge of Stilton cheese tumbled out and bounced around inside the box. Alex was a big eater and glad of it.

He quickly slid the food from the bags and cartons that protected it. He crumbled, stirred, and mashed it all into an unappetizing mess; then he closed the box and locked it carefully into vault 644.

June appeared as he was putting his master key back in the top drawer. Alex beamed at her.

"I've been fired," he said. His voice rang with triumph. "Do me a favor and call Hoskins in Personnel. Tell him I won't be coming back from lunch. And tell him the bank stinks." But not, he added mentally, as bad as it will.

He wondered happily how long it would take for his lunch to start to smell and how the bank would ever figure out which vault the stink was coming from.

He picked up the cardboard box with his things in it and walked out of the vault. At the door, he stopped and took a last look around. Then he turned, spread his wings abroad, and soared out into the world.

FICTION

Don't Mention It

by David Justice



So one time, another time, musta been 'bout April, we're sittin' around, thinking: maybe play some pool. But Joey says no, too nice a day, and we go out to the sidewalk looking at the old cars, the new cars, and the garbage cans. Then up off in the distance, sort of shimmering in the smog, Joey spots this dame.

"She's heading our way," says Joey.

"Ye-es, she's coming on down the line."

"This could be our customer coming in."

"Could right sure be one at that."

Now, fact a the matter, we do this a lot; but this one time, she didn't turn down a side street or keep right on walking by; so this is the time I'm telling you about.

She keeps walking towards us like she's coming into focus. Joey and I stop what we're saying and just watch. When she gets to us, she stops.

"I'm looking for . . ."

"You found it," I say.

She nods. We go into the building and head upstairs.

She looks to be about forty, made up to look younger. Pretty clothes, but frayed. She sees the sign that says MURPHY BROS.—PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS and says, kinda archly, "You *are* the brothers Murphy?"

"Yeh, I'm Murphy, and he's Joey," I say. She frowns.

I push open the door. The office, unfortunately, is just like we left it. Crud all over everything. Moose head in the sink.

"Have a seat," I say gravely, indicating an overturned crate.

She looks around doubtfully. "Is this where you work?"

"And eat, and sleep, and—right behind that door there—play pool. State your business."

"I—I—I don't know how to say this—"

"It's all right, we know. Your husband disappeared."

She looks at me with a round mouth. "How did you know?"

"We're detectives, lady. Look, it happens all a time. Only kina case we get."

"Oh! Then I have come to the right place. You are—specialists, then?"

"Y'might say, y'might say."

She nods, with furrowed brow. "Then I am in your hands."

"So!" I say, happy to have a case at last. "When did your husband disappear?"

She speaks quite distinctly, as though saying a set piece. "Just one year ago today."

I look over at Joey and notice he's lookin' at me. We both got the same look.

"Uh—lady—you ever report this to the police?"

"I did not. They could not possibly understand."

"Hmm, okay. And, why did you wait to come to us until, ah, one year to the day?"

"I believe in anniversaries," she said primly. "This is also, I might mention, the fifteenth anniversary of our having met."

"Oh, well, many happy returns of the day. Sort of. Now, your name?"

Again quite distinctly. "Mrs. Roger Bosworth."

I hate it when dames do that. I mean, they got a name, don't

they? The "Mrs." already tells you they're hitched. "Mrs. Roger Bosworth" sounds like Roger Bosworth in drag.

"Okay, ah, maiden name?"

"As a maiden," she says, "I was known as Vera Simms." Somehow this doesn't sound quite right.

"Okay. Now, usually, we like ta have the clients come in a little earlier, 'cause the circumstances of the disappearance can give us clues."

"I remember it as clearly as though it were today."

"Uh—oh, good. Well. So. Describe it."

Her eyes got a faraway look.

"It was a melancholy day in April, a day much like today. The evening settled early. We had been to a matinee—the sort of brittle thing the theater thrives on, then throws away.

"We returned to our home in the country. The servants had gone out. I sat upon the window seat, gazing across the vast expanse of lawn. Roger had put on his dressing gown and had gone to the den to mix drinks. When he did not return, I became disturbed. Fear, or some nameless emotion, seized and held my breast."

I let out a low whistle. "I shoulda made popcorn."

She went on like she didn't notice.

"I went to the den; he was not there. A decanter of fine gin stood on a sideboard, with no glass or ice or tonic. It was then that I began to suspect that something had gone wrong.

"I fled to the bedroom, the study—the patio and the salon. I even inspected the kitchen. But my husband, my lover, was gone!

"And when I returned to the windows, I found on the mantel—this note."

She reached into her bosom—my eyes followed her fingers all the way down—and drew out a pale blue sheet of paper. "You may read."

I took it, not liking the setup too much. "Dearest treasure," it said, "my life, my light, I—" and then it broke off. Written in a florid, almost feminine hand.

I'm not liking this. My brain has come to a complete stop. I want to somehow back up. But Joey plows right in.

"I don't get it. Yer sittin' right next to these winders, in the, what room now—?"

She looks flustered. "The—the drawing room."

"An'en, you go in ta where this guy, sorry, yer husband is whomping up some booze."

She shivers, and nods.

"What you call it, the den."

A quick nod, as though wanting to get over with this.

"An' it looks like he disappears from there, right? am I followin'? 'cos he just got the gin wit'out none a the fixin's. Course, that's the way I drink it, but I get the idea yer old man liked limes in it, and spritz in it, and maybe little flags. Okay. So, bingo, somethin' innarupted 'im. An'en you got haulin' out after 'im, an'—"

"Please, Mr. Murphy."

"Call me Joey. An'en'e's not there, an' you mess aroun' an'en you go back and, double bingo, there's a note, right? what ain't been there before?"

"I—I couldn't say."

"'Cos like you don't meet him onna way. It's just—I mean are there like two entrances to this den and this, like, drawing room? Like in a Marx brothers? I mean—"

"It's hard to explain."

"Yeh, I kin see that. Maybe it'd help if we could see the house."

"I'm . . . afraid that won't be possible. We had to sell the estate. The creditors were relentless. Since that day I have had no support, a widow in all but name. At present I am residing in an apartment."

"How long ya been there?" I say.

"I beg your—? Oh. Let me see. Well, it would be three years."

"Maybe exactly three years, like an anniversary?"

"No," she says, a little frostily.

"All right," I say, "forget the floorplan. You heard anything from him since then?"

Again the knitted brow. "Not from Roger personally, no. But about a year after his disappearance, I received an envelope with no return address, postmarked from the south of France. It said: 'Abandon your futile efforts to learn the truth.' The truth of what, it did not specify."

I'm liking this less and less and less.

"All right, ahh, look. Can you tell us the name of any of his associates, any places he went regular, stuff like that?"

"Certainly. He was a member of the Nautical Club, here in town. And of the Belmont."

"The Belmont?"

"The country club, just outside the city limits."

"Yeh, okay. Friends?"

"Of course he had friends! Dozens and dozens of them!"

"Names?"

She frowned. "That—I cannot give you. He was . . . there was always an air of mystery about his work."

"Oof, you ain't makin' this easy. Okay, your address, and a number you can be reached."

"I am at Apartment 3B, Bellerose Terrace apartments, 1898 Eighth Street. The phone is 757-1171."

I nod, and slap my pocket.

"Hey, Joey, you got a pencil there, pal?"

Joey frowns and looks down at his T-shirt. No pocket. He reaches for his trousers pocket, but can't get his hand in, so he stands up, plunges both hands down, and comes up empty. He's starting to sit down when he thinks of something, straightens up, puts both hands in his back trousers pockets, and comes up with a wad of stuff but no pencil. Then he puts it back, thinks, shakes his head, and sits down. I'm gritting my teeth.

"Sorry, Murphy, no pencil. You got one?"

"Joey, would I ask you for a pencil if I got one myself?"

"I dunno, Murphy, you do strange things."

"Yeh, tell me about it. Excuse me, Mrs. Bosworth, do you have a pencil I can borrow?"

"I—I don't know." She looks reluctantly at her handbag, a little narrow job looks more like a pencil case than anything, but I guess she got more important stuff in there than pencils. She opens it, rummages, rummages some more, and some stuff spills out. I pick it up—lipstick and stuff like that—but in among it I notice a library card, the city library.

Now, normally, when I know something someone else don't know, I like to keep it private, 'cause it puts me one up. But in this case the only thing is that she don't know I know it, and I'm more interested in what she will say.

"Mrs. Bosworth, I notice that your library card is made out to 'Vera Simms.' Any special reason?"

"Yes, I, I went back to using it after my husband disappeared, that is, after it looked, it seemed as if he would not be coming back."

"I see. One final thing. Where did your husband go to college?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, you know, it might give us a lead. You know, the old school tie."

"Princeton," she said proudly, with a small smile and a lift of her head.

I call the Princeton records office and it's like I figured: no record. I head over the city library and go through the past twenty years' phone books. Some years there's a V. Simms, some years nothing, but never any Bosworth, Roger, Mr. and Mrs.

Joey comes back from checking out the leads, all hot and bothered.

"I don't believe it, Murphy, this guy has vanished without a trace. The country club's got nothing, and nothing at the Nautical, neither. Not in the archives, and nobody admits he knows him. Somebody's scared, Murph. If ya ask me, it's a innernational gang."

"Yeh, thanks, Joey, could be. Look, you wait here, I'm gonna check in with Mrs. Bosworth, straighten out a few points."

I leave him puzzling over these notes he's made up.

The first thing I want to straighten is this d**n dame's head. She's been holding out on me, playing me for a chump. I don't like that in a client.

I head over to Eighth Street—not a real great address—and realize I've forgotten the house number, what I never written down. But the "Bellerose Terrace" sticks in my mind, one a these phony-fancy names like a window box with plastic flowers. I find it, and head up to Apartment 3A.

A little old lady answers. She smiles—either trusting, or just too old to be afraid. She invites me in.

"Ah, my name is Michael Murphy. Is ah, is Mrs., is Vera Bosworth in?"

"No one's in but me, ever. I live alone."

"I—oh. You're not the mother, or a housekeeper, or . . ."

"I am a mother, but not 'the' mother, whatever that may mean."

"See, I'm looking for a Mrs. Roger Bosworth. Also goes by the name of Vera Simms."

"Oh yes, Vera lives just across the landing, in 3B."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I come to the wrong apartment." But I'm not sorry. This grandma looks like she lived here a long time. Sixty years' worth a photos and stuff on the walls, anyway.

"Tell me, you know Mrs. Bosworth a long time?"

"I don't know a Mrs. Bosworth. You mean Vera, yes?"

"Yes."

"I have lived in this apartment for fifteen years. She has been here about five."

"Five—not three. You're certain."

"Certainly I'm certain. Before that there was that horrible man."

"Is Vera married?"

"Mr. Murphy, such questions you ask."

"I'm sorry. Look, Mrs.—"

"Rieger."

"Mrs. Rieger. I'm a detective. Vera hired me to find her man."

"To find her a man? That's most unusual. But I can't say I blame her . . ."

"No, not *a* man, *her* man. Husband. Has she ever been married?"

She looked at me with sorry eyes. It wasn't clear who she was sorry for. I think she was sorry for a lot of things.

"Mr. Murphy, that wasn't fair to you. I will tell you what I know, though I don't like to discuss another's affairs."

We sit down in her tiny parlor. The only other room is the kitchen, just visible beyond.

"Vera Simms," she says, not like gossip, but halfway between giving testimony and telling a youngster the facts of life, "has never to my knowledge been married. I can't say for sure, she tells so many stories, but it is hard to imagine that she has. For one thing, she lacks the most elementary knowledge of the physical realities of man and woman. I have tried, very gently, to enlighten her, but I think that she doesn't want to know."

I'd basically expected this. But, still, I feel a little sick.

"The most likely thing, of all she's told me, crying on my shoulder from time to time, is that she was indeed engaged, but the man broke it off with her. Died, she would have it, on the way to the altar, but that's tripe."

I growl, "Tripe is right."

She leans back a bit. "I shouldn't have used that expression. I'm sorry now. Vera's fantasies are unfortunate, and I'm sorry she has involved you. But she means no harm, she cannot help herself. I choose to be kind."

Feeling small, I thank her and go out.

Leads, and dead ends, and a probable upshot. But I have to make sure.

I call the number Vera gave me—I'd forgotten it, but it's in the book. She answers in a dreamy voice.

"Mrs. Bosworth, this is Michael Murphy. I'm working hard on your case. Just one thing that would help us in our investigations. When did you and Roger get married?"

"As I mentioned, we met in April, fifteen years ago today. Love was immediate, marriage came quickly. I was a June bride."

I thanked her and went down to the records office. No records of anyone of either name getting hitched.

But on a hunch, I checked back at the library, their newspaper archive. Sure enough, there was a Roger Bosworth, a lieutenant in the Navy, died valiantly in action sixteen years ago, written up big in the local papers. There was a photograph—goodlooking bugger, I got to admit that. Long account, how he did this, that, and the other thing. Mourned by all who knew him, including his fiancée—but it was not Vera Simms.

I go back to the office, feeling sick at the stomach. Joey is there, looking frustrated. He's come up with a pencil from somewhere, and has been covering the table with charts.

"I don't get it, Murph," he says as I come in. "It just doesn't figure. The gin, the note, the disappearance, the stonewalling at the club—it doesn't add up."

"It adds up, Joey. It adds up to zero. The dame's been taking us for a ride. She was never married, probably never met Bosworth, sure as heck never had any estate. She's out to lunch, Joey, she's lunchin' on us, and we been pickin' up the check."

Joey's eyes drop. "Ya know, Murph, acchally, I'm not all that surprised to hear that. It acchally iksplains a few things."

"It explains that we been had. Plus I been to her apartment building, and it's a dump. It's a cinch she can't pay us. She doesn't have a dime to her name."

Joey nods his head sadly.

"And right now I'm goin' over there and tell her where to get off, but good."

Then sadly, but very definitely, Joey shakes his head.

"Look, she may be a dizzy dame, but she's people, Murph. So what if she gets on a high horse. You gonna take her down just f' that? It's what she's gotta do, ta keep her head on. I mean, the things you and I do, Murphy, I mean, let's not throw stones."

Dang it, he's got it again. "Yer right, Joey. Let's break it to her gentle."

"N-no-o, no, Murphy, nothin's gonna get broken, not in *this* case. Here's what we do."

I listened, and heck, my hat's off to the brother. We head over there together, wearing the best clothes we own.

She opens to us slowly, looking at us with something like fear. I take off my hat and we walk in.

"Mrs. Bosworth, what I have to say may pain you. But I must ask you to be brave."

She pales, she looks from side to side, she passes her hand over her head.

"When your husband disappeared, he was on a mission, one of the utmost importance to the security of these United States. For six months, he was under deep cover. He was desperate to communicate with you, and it burned in his heart that he could not. But he told himself that just this one time, he would put the freedom of the planet before his private passion—his passion for the woman he loved."

The color has returned to her skin. She is listening with eyes closed.

"Six months went by, risking incredible dangers. At the end of those six, terribly outnumbered, he fell victim to an enemy bullet, in the course of saving the life of a child. With his dying breath, he said your name. And he left—this: for you."

Solemnly, my eyes not wavering, I hold out to her a red rose.

She gathers it up the way you would a child, sighing so softly I can hardly hear. The thorns prick her, but she doesn't notice it. She breathes deeply, filling her lungs with the scent.

The last rays of the afternoon are straining through the dust-stained windows of her tiny apartment.

"Oh, Mr. Murphy—and you too, Mr. . . . Murphy—how can I ever, ever thank you enough? You have returned the water of life to my soul."

I nod, and pick up my hat to go.

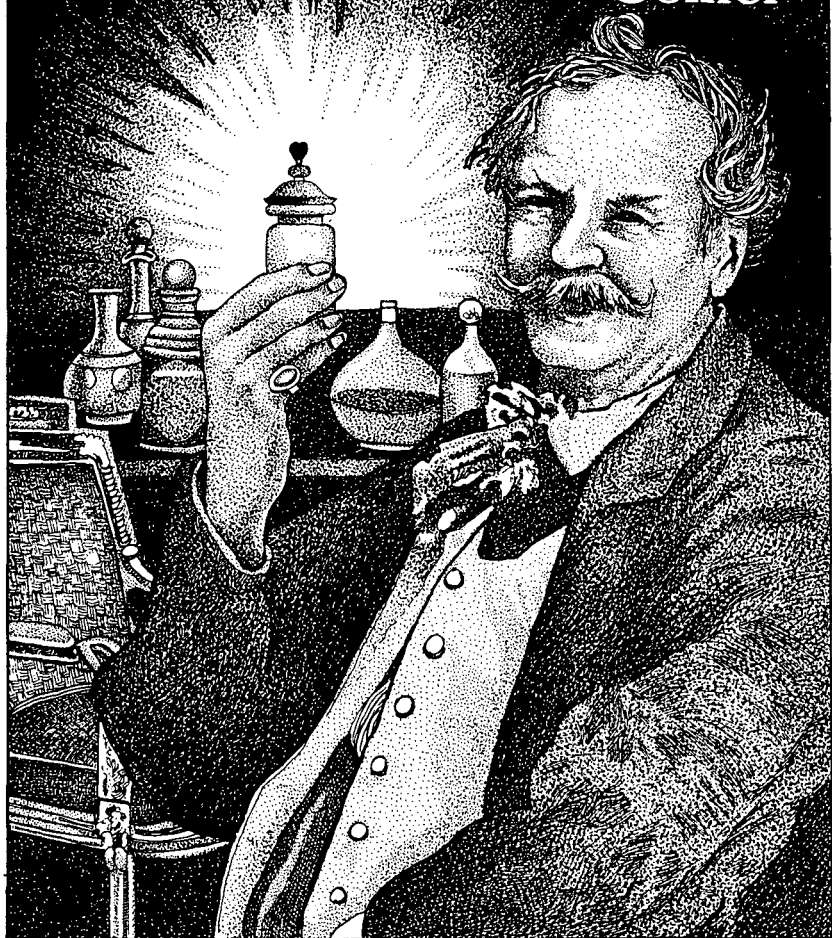
She puts her hand to her breast and gives a little laugh through the last of her tears. "Oh! But what am I saying. I never paid you what you have so richly earned. Here, let me write you a check this instant."

I turn, already on the threshold. "That's okay, Mrs. Bosworth. We only charge when we bring 'em back alive."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Chaser

by John
Collier



Alan Austen, as nervous as a kitten, went up certain dark and creaky stairs in the neighborhood of Pell Street, and peered about for a long time on the dim landing before he found the name he wanted written obscurely on one of the doors.

He pushed open this door, as he had been told to do, and found himself in a tiny room, which contained no furniture but a plain kitchen table, rocking chair, and an ordinary chair. On one of the dirty buff-colored walls were a couple of shelves, containing in all perhaps a dozen bottles and jars.

An old man sat in the rocking chair, reading a newspaper. Alan, without a word, handed him the card he had been given. "Sit down, Mr. Austen," said the old man very politely. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."

"Is it true," asked Alan, "that you have a certain mixture that has—er—quite extraordinary effects?"

"My dear sir," replied the old man, "my stock in trade is not very large—I don't deal in laxatives and teething mixtures—but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary."

"Well, the fact is—" began Alan.

"Here, for example," interrupted the old man, reaching for a bottle from the shelf. "Here is a liquid as colorless as water, almost tasteless, quite imperceptible in coffee, milk, wine, or any other beverage. It is also quite imperceptible to any known method of autopsy."

"Do you mean it is a poison?" cried Alan, very much horrified.

"Call it cleaning fluid if you like," said the old man indifferently. "Lives need cleaning. Call it a spot remover. 'Out, damned spot!' Eh? 'Out, brief candle!'"

"I want nothing of that sort," said Alan.

"Probably it is just as well," said the old man. "Do you know the price of this? For one teaspoonful, which is sufficient, I ask five thousand dollars. Never less. Not a penny less."

"I hope all your mixtures are not as expensive," said Alan apprehensively.

"Oh, dear, no," said the old man. "It would be no good charging that sort of price for a love potion, for example. Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love potion."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said Alan.

"I look at it like this," said the old man. "Please a customer with

one article, and he will come back when he needs another. Even if it is more costly. He will save up for it, if necessary."

"So," said Alan, "you really do sell love potions?"

"If I did not sell love potions," said the old man, reaching for another bottle, "I should not have mentioned the other matter to you. It is only when one is in a position to oblige that one can afford to be so confidential."

"And these potions," said Alan. "They are not just—just—er—"

"Oh, no," said the old man. "Their effects are permanent, and extend far beyond the mere casual impulse. But they include it. Oh, yes, they include it. Bountifully. Insistently. Everlastingly."

"Dear me!" said Alan, attempting a look of scientific detachment. "How very interesting!"

"But consider the spiritual side," said the old man.

"I do, indeed," said Alan.

"For indifference," said the old man, "they substitute devotion. For scorn, adoration. Give one tiny measure of this to the young lady—its flavor is imperceptible in orange juice, soup, or cock-tails—and however gay and giddy she is, she will change altogether. She'll want nothing but solitude, and you."

"I can hardly believe it," said Alan. "She is so fond of parties."

"She will not like them any more," said the old man. "She'll be afraid of the pretty girls you may meet."

"She'll actually be jealous?" cried Alan in a rapture. "Of me?"

"Yes, she will want to be everything to you."

"She is, already. Only she doesn't care about it."

"She will, when she has taken this. She will care intensely. You'll be her sole interest in life."

"Wonderful!" cried Alan.

"She'll want to know all you do," said the old man. "All that has happened to you during the day. Every word of it. She'll want to know what you are thinking about, why you smile suddenly, why you are looking sad."

"That is love!" cried Alan.

"Yes," said the old man. "How carefully she'll look after you! She'll never allow you to be tired, to sit in a draft, to neglect your food. If you are an hour late, she'll be terrified. She'll think you are killed, or that some siren has caught you."

"I can hardly imagine Diana like that!" cried Alan.

"You will not have to use your imagination," said the old man. "And by the way, since there are always sirens, if by any chance

you *should*, later on, slip a little, you need not worry. She will forgive you, in the end. She'll be terribly hurt, of course, but she'll forgive you—in the end."

"That will not happen," said Alan fervently.

"Of course not," said the old man. "But, if it does, you need not worry. She'll never divorce you. Oh, no! And, of course, she herself will never give you the least grounds for—not divorce, of course—but even uneasiness."

"And how much," said Alan, "how much is this wonderful mixture?"

"It is not so dear," said the old man, "as the spot remover, as I think we agreed to call it. No. That is five thousand dollars; never a penny less. One has to be older than you are, to indulge in that sort of thing. One has to save up for it."

"But the love potion?" said Alan.

"Oh, that," said the old man, opening a drawer in the kitchen table, and taking out a tiny, rather dirty-looking phial. "That is just a dollar."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Alan, watching him fill it.

"I like to oblige," said the old man. "Then customers come back, later in life, when they are rather better off, and want more expensive things. Here you are. You will find it very effective."

"Thank you again," said Alan. "Goodbye."

"*Au revoir*," said the old man.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



ANTHONY OLIVER

The contribution made to crime fiction by British authors is so enormous one pales at the mere thought that these writers could have chosen another kind of novel to write. Good grief! Even fans of the more hardboiled variety are likely to feel impoverished were they deprived of devilish Christie plots, sparkling Sayers dialogue, intoxicating Doyle atmosphere. All added to the literature, inspiring those who followed. The contemporary batch of British novelists is as formidable: P.D. James and Ruth Rendell; Robert Barnard and Peter Dickinson; Patricia Moyes and Simon Brett, to name but a few. As one might appreciatively remark in England, "Lovely."

I'm here to tell you about a

relative newcomer to the ranks. Anthony Oliver has, since 1980, published four books in a new and wonderfully quirky series that one could term quintessentially British. In 1980 *The Pew Group* appeared in this country, introducing us to a bored and depressed young housewife in a village called Flaxfield. The sudden death of her older husband (who fatally trips over his wife's foot and falls down their stairs) brings Doreen's mother on the scene. Lizzie Thomas, a widow herself, is a wildly eccentric character, full of disconcerting surprises which prove to be as shocking to her reader's sensibilities as her outlandish costumes are to her new Suffolk neighbors. Let's let Oliver introduce her.

"The village of Flaxfield in

the county of Suffolk is small, quiet, compact, and almost unspoiled by the ravages of the twentieth century. It lies in the open East Anglian countryside, a happy jumble of styles where the earliest traces of Saxon blend happily with the Tudor and Caroline, and the Georgian porches stand content next to the more solid doorways of their Victorian neighbours. Since about 1850 successive parish councils have resolutely set their by-laws against further developments and the village now looks very much as it did then. It has been invaded by Vikings, Normans, Cromwell's soldiers, and Mrs. Thomas.

"Invader was not a word Mrs. Thomas herself would have used. If she had considered her position at all she would more accurately have seen herself as a missionary. A Welsh missionary among the friendly but slightly backward tribes of England. . . . All over England Welsh schoolteachers, mayors, councillors, trade union leaders, and civil servants unobtrusively ruled the land and Mrs. Thomas was lucky to have Flaxfield to herself."

Despite her "bad legs," Lizzie energetically undertakes the preparations for the funeral (stoutly believing the natives' way to be a poor showing, indeed!), for Doreen's future, and for her own half-baked plans to

relocate to Flaxfield permanently. The title, *The Pew Group*, refers to a very rare and priceless piece of pottery which had lately come into Doreen's ignorant hands—and has now disappeared. The commission of a crime leads Lizzie to ask the aid of another recent village resident, retired police inspector John Webber. He is the perfect foil for the stout-hearted Lizzie: Webber has been pensioned off early due to a heart condition, and he has just been released from a long and loveless marriage to return to his boyhood home. John and Lizzie are one of the great odd couples of mystery fiction, attracted as opposites so often are, and bound together by mutual—if sometimes open-mouthed—admiration.

Oliver paints a number of miniature portraits of village residents, and as his tale unfolds, each plays an important part. The effect, at times, is much like the manic scenes in silent films, where the camera remains positioned at the end of a long corridor with many identical doors, and characters pop in and out and run across or down the length of the hall, only to disappear behind a second door moments before a different character appears at yet another. It would be dizzying were not the implacable Webber and his sidekick Lizzie

staunchly centered in each novel. Comfortable with themselves and one another, John and Lizzie (and the vicarage cat, Bunter) steady the books, which veer from the tragically comic to the near-pitiful to the insanely silly. *The Pew Group*, especially, is marked by the comically eccentric.

The Property of a Lady (1983) and *The Elberg Collection* (1985) are more serious cases, and have more solemn undertones. The former opens when a rather shy and lonely young woman picks up a handsome young hitchhiker. There promise to be more dire consequences than a broken heart—for *someone* in Flaxfield, that is. The case in *The Elberg Collection* comes to the detecting duo through John, rather than through Lizzie's inquisitiveness. Jessica Elberg, wife of a wealthy manufacturer, wants a more complete report of the bizarre death of her parents in France. While vacationing, walking along a beach, the mother's dress caught fire and both the couple quickly burned to death on the sand. A crony of Webber's from Scotland Yard recommends Webber to the daughter; but it is Lizzie who speaks colloquial French, and who has an old friend who lives in the tiny village. So she is sleuthing in France (much to Doreen's curiosity and displea-

sure) while Webber tries to find a motive at home.

The latest, *Cover-up*, brings us back to the countryside near Flaxfield, and to the antics over a priceless painting—or is it? Now we're on ground explored in *The Pew Group*, not just geographically but morally. The cupidity of collectors—and everyone else, for that matter—who hope to get something for a song, and sell it for a full-scale opera, is Oliver's theme again. Lizzie's insatiable meddling gets Webber involved here, and together they finally tie the loose ends. Oliver, a former actor and full-time antiques dealer, has used the antiques business as background, more or less, for his four books to date. His knowledge adds a special dimension to the novels.

And just what is Lizzie and Webber's relationship? Well, she is Webber's housekeeper; she lives in her own cottage but fixes most of his meals. (And she's a divine cook, too.) More than that—well, who knows? We don't, nor does daughter Doreen. It bothers Doreen—not knowing just how close the two sleuths really are—a lot more than it does this reader. And as long as it annoys Doreen, I don't suppose Lizzie will clear that little mystery up.

(All four novels were published

in hardcover in Doubleday three are now out in Fawcett Crime Club editions. The first paperbacks.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Slow Burn by Joel Helgersen (Bantam, \$3.50, 248 pp.) is a hot first novel that will keep you awake burning the midnight oil before you put it down unfinished. Chet Johnston is a Minneapolis private eye, a former fireman pushed into early retirement by an on-the-job injury to his leg. He's also a widower; that last fire he fought robbed him of his wife as well as one good kneecap. When a veteran fireman dies in a firehouse blaze, the dead man's mother asks Chet to investigate. She believes the department is covering something up. Chet, also a former arson specialist, seems the logical choice, right? Only if you conveniently forget the fact that Chet himself once accused the dead man of murdering his wife. Helgersen heats things up fast against a backdrop of sub-zero temperatures in a Minnesota winter, and readers will burn for more adventures of Chet, his firehouse buddies, and his oddly touching family.

Mignon F. Ballard has written a contemporary suspense tale with strong overtones of the supernatural titled **Cry at Dusk** (Dodd, Mead, \$15.95, 222 pp.). At the heart of this tale is the bond between two sisterly cousins and childhood friends. Laney was the wild one, while Laura was her cousin's best audience and staunchest defender. Now Laney is dead, apparently the victim of an accident off the spooky Crybaby Bridge. But the ensuing three months since Laney's funeral have haunted Laura, who decides she must return to her small hometown in South Carolina and learn the truth of Laney's death. A number of long-buried secrets are brought to light before Laura discovers what it was that Laney herself was hiding—the secret she almost carried to her grave. There's some good atmosphere here and an interesting relationship between the cousins, but some might find the plot a little thin.

Marian Babson's **Death in Fashion** (Bantam, \$2.95, 152 pp.) is another amusing British mystery by a solid author of more than two dozen books. The background here is the world of haute couture, with its temperamental designers, its pampered, powerful buyers, its overworked photographers and overpaid models. The fact that the tale is peopled largely with stock characters (the Duchess of Farthingdale is an exception) in no way detracts from one's enjoyment here. It's like eating one's favorite flavor of ice cream.

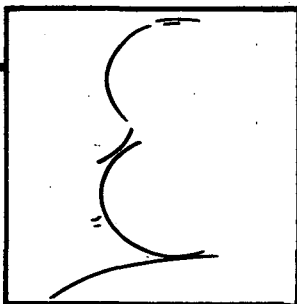


Courtesy Lionheart Television

The mystery writer/hero of the British TV series, *The Singing Detective*, as he imagines himself playing the master sleuth of his own novel.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Asix-part British mystery series more intricate and original than any we have ever viewed on screen will be shown on Public TV this summer. **The Singing Detective** is about a mystery writer confined to a hospital bed for three months by a flare-up of the skin eczema from which he has suffered most of his life. In his feverish state he goes over the details of his first novel, *The Singing Detective*, and begins to comprehend their sources in his own life. The viewer sees the scenes from the book (in which the writer himself plays the debonair detective), along with scenes from the writer's childhood, and the writer's apparently paranoid imaginings of his wife having an affair—with a man played by the same actor as the villain of the novel.

Not until the second or third

episode is the viewer able to sort out the different stories, or to realize that they contain not only repeating characters but also repeating themes. Yet exactly what the mystery to be solved is remains hidden even longer. (To us this was a new twist. But perhaps some of our readers know of other mysteries that hold off revealing what the mystery is until just before the end.) The strongest clue comes from the remembered novel when its detective realizes that the villain is his own client. The first rule of detecting, he pronounces, is "never trust your client." But who is the client here—not in the remembered novel but in the TV series of the same title that we are watching?

So difficult is the plot of *The Singing Detective*, and so unprecedentedly surprising the identity of the villain, that we

think it not unfair to reveal that the mystery to be solved has to do with incidents from the writer's own childhood. He gradually remembers these partly through his fevered hallucinations and partly with the help of the hospital psychiatrist. He also comes to realize that the people from his childhood were the sources of the characters in his novel. In fact, the *corpus delicti*—a whore found drowned in the Thames—is based on his mother, while the detective, who works part time as a nightclub singer, is based on his father, who sang part time in the small northern town of the writer's childhood.

The experience of remembering is captured through popular songs of the 1940's, the period of the writer's childhood—"Peg O' My Heart" (the theme song), "Accentuate the Positive," "Bei Mir Bist Du Shoen," "A Paper Doll I Can Call My Own." These are sung by the father, by the singing detective of the novel, and (quite comically) by the doctors, nurses, and patients of the hospital ward as these characters are filtered through the writer's delirium. His exasperation with himself and others for suffering from eczema is expressed in both profanity and a richly allusive literary language—which is complemented by the narration of his novel in a literarily heightened version

of James M. Cain tough-guy detective talk. The acting of the British Shakespearean actress, Janet Suzman, as the writer's possibly deceiving wife, and of the less well known Michael Gambon as the writer are both first rate. The photography is stunning, and its sharply-etched images of the drowned woman, a menacing scarecrow in a field, the boy perched high atop a tree "detecting" people, are repeatedly flashed on the screen as memory traces that take on continually deeper meanings as the plots unfold.

On the other hand close-ups of the writer covered with peeling red skin, and the clinical detail of hospital routine, make one want to turn away from the screen, while the frustration of not knowing what the mystery is about even after having put in hours of viewing makes *The Singing Detective* a very problematic thing to watch. Tried briefly it is sure to disappoint. But the dedicated, problem-solving mystery fan who sticks with it is in for a rich if unsettling experience. Last winter the series' three segments of two and a quarter hours each were shown late at night and without advance publicity, no doubt because the programmer judged the show to be too difficult for most viewers. It is to be hoped that the summer schedule will be better advertised and more convenient.

THE STORY THAT WON

The Mid-December Mysteri-photo) was won by Art Cosing. Honorable mentions go to California; Larry Sayles of Homewood, Illinois; Cathy James Loverde of Chicago, Colville, Washington; Florence Elliott of Wilberforce, Ontario, Canada; Debra Robic of Belmont, California; Peter M. Winkler of Franklin, Pennsylvania; and David Matthews of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.



ous Photograph contest (seeing of Arlington, Virginia. Tim Marlowe of Arcadia, Irving, Texas; Ed Doyle of Hern of Seattle, Washington; Illinois; Patricia Hansen of

THE LAST CLASS TRIP by Art Cosing

The class trip up Snake Mountain to view the changing fall foliage was a disaster.

Twelve bored delinquents, aged eight to ten, sealed in a school bus for four hours, were just too much for Mr. Robinson, the science teacher. And it got worse whenever he let them spill out at each of the mountain overlooks.

"Everyone off the parapets," shouted Mr. Robinson. "And you, Timothy, put that pocket knife away.

"Attention, gentlemen," said Mr. Robinson, "I have been asked about your final grades. Let me explain: I mark strictly on the curve. In a class with twelve students, four get good grades, four will just pass, four will flunk. And you, Timothy," he said with a smile, "don't look to make the cut. Now, someone pass me my binoculars."

"I must have left them on the wall at the last overlook, two miles down," Timothy said. "I'm sorry."

"Everyone stay right here until I return," said Mr. Robinson.

All twelve boys rushed to the wall at the edge of the overlook to watch the bus with Mr. Robinson at the wheel as it snaked down the mountain road.

Mr. Robinson strove mightily to control the bus, but when the tires blew, the vehicle crashed through the guard rail and tumbled down the mountain.

"Attention, gentlemen," said Timothy. "Let me explain. The way I see it, Mr. Robinson unfortunately overlooked the knife cuts in his tires, underestimated the grade, and flunked on the curve. Now, someone pass me his binoculars . . ."

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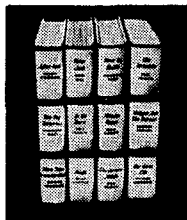
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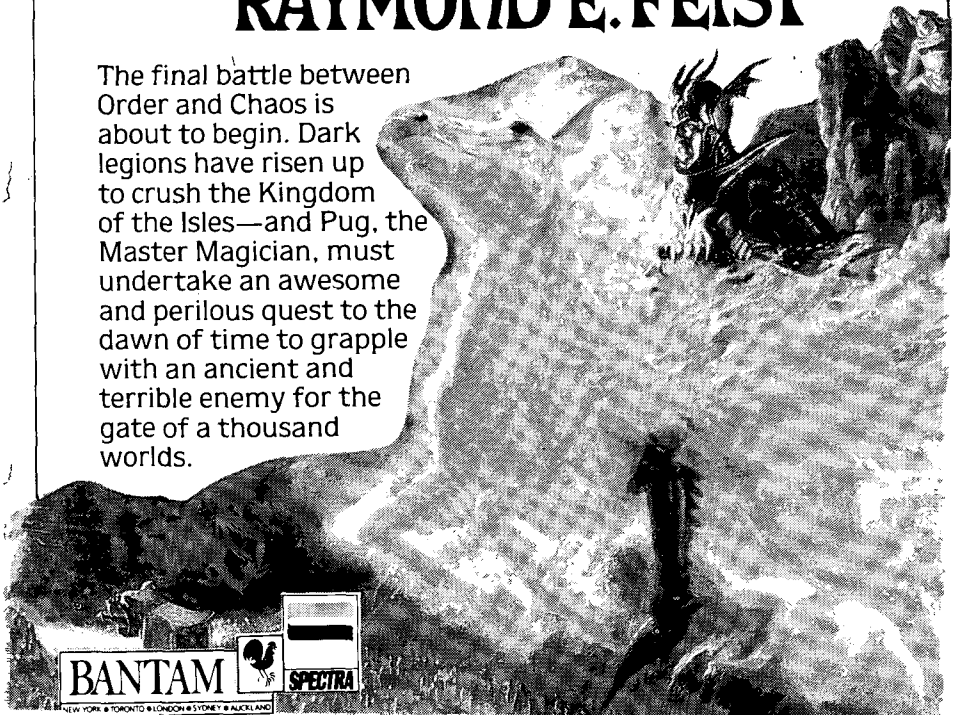
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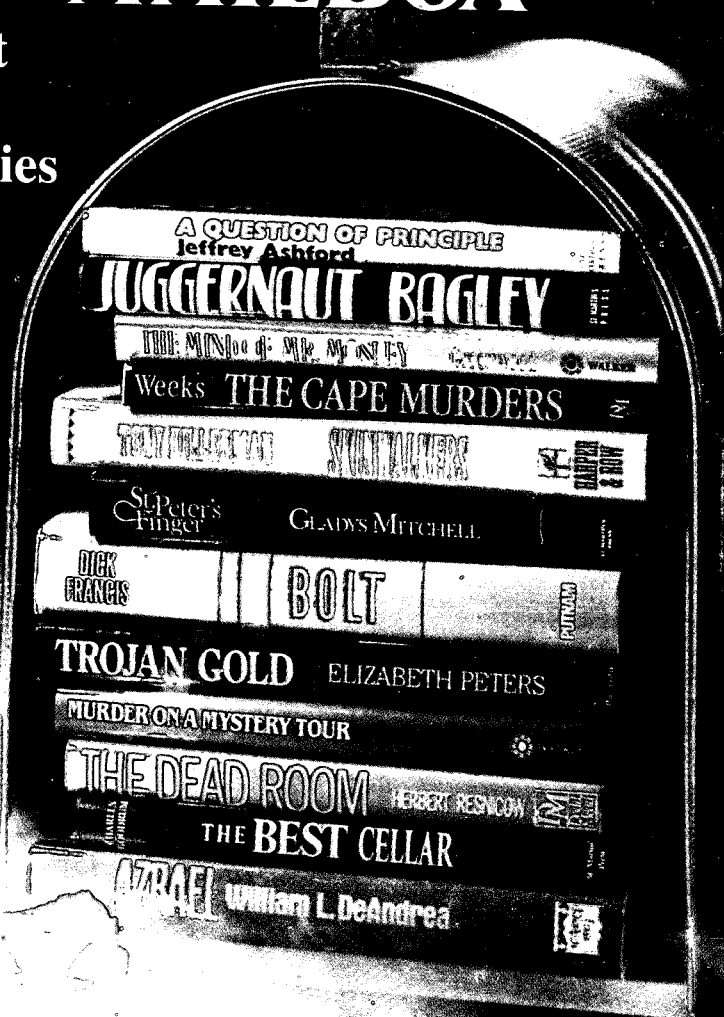


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